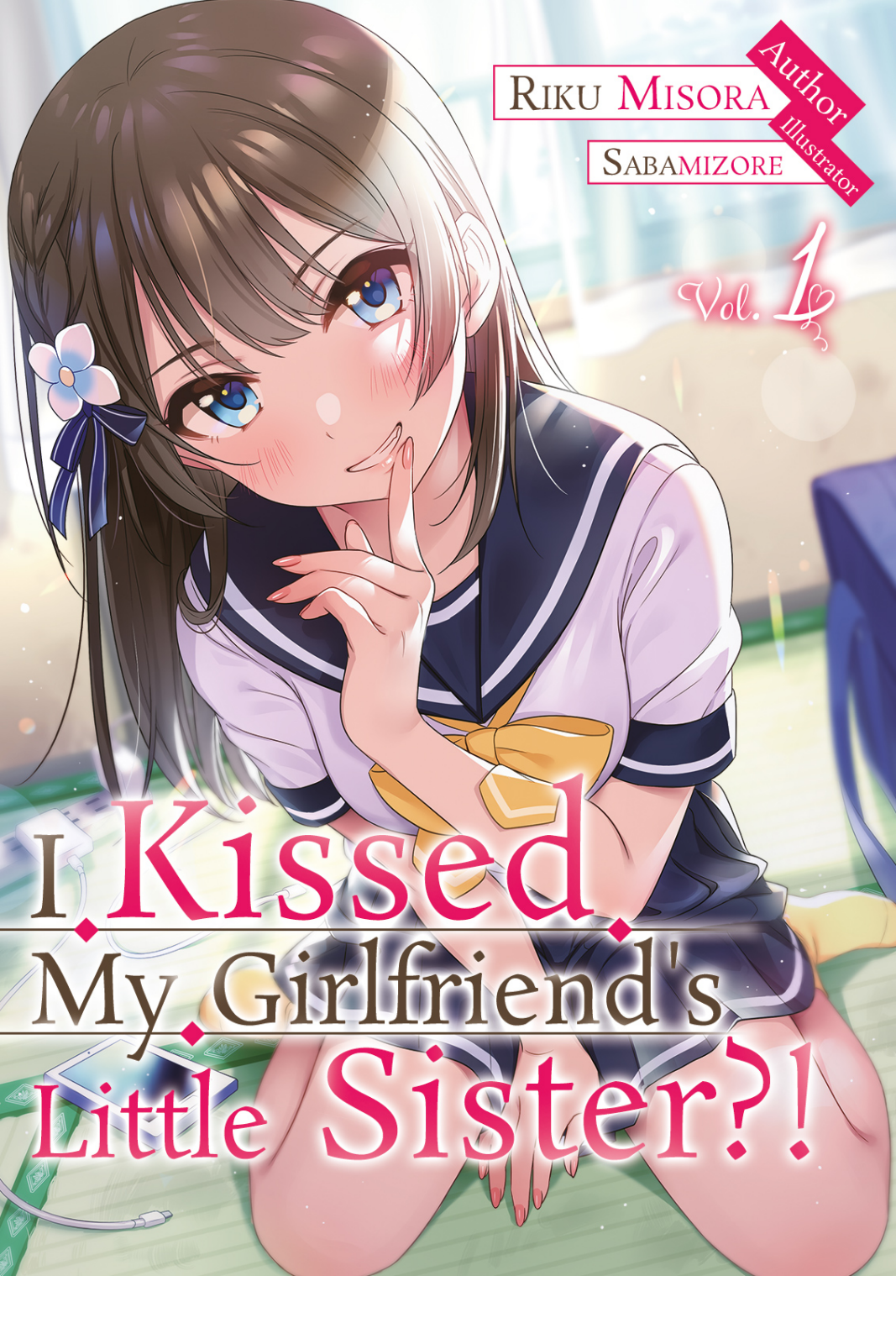




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Vol. 1

I Kissed My Girlfriend's Little Sister?!





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I turned my gaze towards the kitchen, and there she was. She was unmistakable, the one preparing the dish was none other than my own sister.



The next day I woke up to a scent at first barely recognizable, but soon enough I realized...

...That it was the smell of Miso Soup.

“Tch...”

Crap... She's just washing
my hands but... this doesn't
feel right. It feels... erotic?!

“Heh, not so
confident now,
are we?”





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presented by MISORA RIKU illust. SABAMIZORE

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Chapter One

First Love X Prelude

I want a girlfriend!

Any young man with a pulse had probably thought the same thing at one point or another. As for me, Hiromichi Satou, I had been obsessed with the idea since at least the eighth grade.

But alas, reality was a cruel mistress. In just about every aspect, I would say I ranged from mediocre to below average. My appearance and athleticism—or lack thereof—were nothing to write home about. I didn't have any remarkable skills, and I wasn't exactly the brightest tool in the shed. My grades were decent, I guess, but that was only because I had plenty of time to study.

And so my middle school years had passed without a single girlfriend. In fact, I don't think I had even spoken to a girl outside of the necessary school stuff, or to pass on a message.

I had made friends of the opposite sex once... way back in elementary school. Where had it all gone wrong? Well, from fifth grade onward, the idea of interacting with girls had become oddly embarrassing. I'd ended up distancing myself from them, having become too sheepish to approach them, and wound up in this sorry state.

Because I feared rejection, I'd never put myself out there—you know how it goes. And so, my time in middle school ended without a single girl. I had royally screwed myself over. Looking back on those three depressingly bleak years, I started to panic. Would I end up finishing my entire school life alone, a bitter virgin without a girlfriend? Please, God, anything but that! That would be a fate worse than death!

I want a girlfriend so friggin' bad!

Although I didn't have my eye on anyone in particular, I was still desperate. Seriously, I didn't have a "type" at all—I'd probably end up falling head over heels for the first girl who confessed to me. I would treasure her above all else—of this, I was certain. I simply wanted to be loved! Doesn't everyone else feel the same way?

In order to find that special someone, that "Cinderella," I'd hyped myself up at the beginning of high school. This time, I would definitely succeed!

But, of course, that unbecoming enthusiasm was crushed after only one month. Whenever I had tried to greet girls, they had turned around and stared at me as if I was some sort of alien. Their suspicious, probing eyes, to me, seemed to say, "Who is this guy?"

What does he even want?" Before those gazes, I had deflated instantly, unable to utter another word.

I'd also asked my more sociable friends to include me in their groups. Unfortunately, I hadn't gained much knowledge or experience of the bizarre entity known as the "female lifeform." I had no clue what sort of conversation their "diets" consisted of, and as a result, I had only been able to come up with noncommittal responses.

Why did it have to be like this? It seemed that to talk to women, I needed to unlock the "charisma with women" skill. But in order to acquire the "charisma with women" skill, I needed to speak to women! Dios mio, sacre bleu! What was with this crappy, one-star game? Would someone please apply a patch to fix this buggy mess?!

In any case, my first year of high school had passed by in miserable shades of gray.

"Hm-hm-hmm! La-di-da-di-daaa!"

But that was all in the past—water under the bridge, you could say. It was now the spring of my junior year, and I was practically skipping my way to school, humming all the while.

Cherry blossom petals, which reminded me that summer was just around the corner, decorated my path. Morning dew clung to the freshly-grown greenery around me, sparkling and accentuating the leaves' vibrant colors. How had I once thought of this wonderful world as a bleak, gray wasteland? It was inconceivable.

What had brought about this sudden change of attitude, you ask? Well...

I'd finally gotten a girlfriend. Yes, you heard me right—a real, flesh-and-blood girlfriend! Me, of all people! A girlfriend!

Ahem, apologies for the sudden outburst. Due to the importance of my announcement, I just wanted to emphasize the "real" nature of my girlfriend. I guess I got carried away there. Can you blame me, though? For once in my life, something exciting had actually happened to me.

Of course, I hadn't been the one to profess my feelings. I wasn't proud of it, but I didn't have that kind of courage. After utterly flubbing the start of my high school career, I'd spent a lengthy freshman year with my male friends, never knowing the touch or scent of a woman. But that had all immediately changed as soon as I started my junior year—a girl had confessed to me!

We were the same age, and—despite attending the same elementary school—we'd each gone to different middle schools. It turned out that we went to the same high school, but I was in advanced placement, while she took regular classes. Since our courses didn't overlap at all, I hadn't been aware of her existence until the confession.

I vaguely remembered her from elementary school. We had both been placed in after-school daycare, and I had called out to her because she had been all alone. I guess I had been her first friend... Who knew it would have led to all this?

From the moment she'd confessed her feelings, my life had sprung from being broadcast in 144p to glorious 4K. It wasn't just the colors either—since that day one month ago, everything about the world had undergone a drastic change.

Until recently, I had only picked up the thick, muggy exhaust fumes during my walk to school. Now, all I could focus on was the fragrant spring breeze. Likewise, the trill of the first bell had once beckoned yet another gloomy school day. Now, however, it proclaimed the good news of another day spent with my girlfriend. Finally, whenever I enjoyed udon in the cafeteria with her, the broth tasted as if it were produced by a gourmet restaurant.

"Anyway, Riko from the cheerleading club was basically begging for it, you know? So we went back to her room together."

"Nice, dude! So how'd it go? You obviously plowed her, right?"

"Heh! Athletic girls never disappoint, know what I mean?"

Before, overhearing these sorts of conversations from the popular guys would have caused me to keel over from jealousy. Now, I could listen to them with a smile on my face. I could even feel—dare I say it—amicable.

Yes, yes, I understand. Romance truly is wonderful, the *crème de la crème* of our youth. Keep fighting the good fight, kings.

"Huh? But Aizawa, weren't you going out with Mao Imura from the band? Did you break up with her?"

"Wait, wasn't he dating Sogabe?"

"Nah, we weren't really dating. C'mon, do you really think I'd settle for girls like them?"

"Huh? You serious? I thought both of them were pretty hot."

"If I'm out of a girl's league, no chance in hell am I committing. Chicks are always sliding into my DMs, man. I don't need one hanging all over me, acting like she's my girlfriend just because we've bumped uglies a few times. Gimme a break."

I take it back. Those guys can eat shit and die.

Sure, there were still a few things that got under my skin, but for the past month, my high school life had never been more vibrant. I was certain this positive outlook was all thanks to my new girlfriend. Because of her, I'd also managed to muster up the courage to open up more with others.

Ladies and gentlemen—without further ado, I'd like to introduce the girl who gave me said courage.

School was over for the day, and I was sitting in the library by

myself, waiting for my girlfriend to arrive. Unlike me, she was part of a club, so I had to wait for her if I wanted us to walk home together. I set about finishing my homework while repeatedly taking quick, eager glances at the library entrance. This continued for a while until I was suddenly hit by a wave of uneasiness. When I checked the time on my smartphone, I noticed it was 6:10PM.

Wait, 6:10? As in, 10 minutes after six o'clock?

We had promised to meet at 6:00 on the dot, and yet the library door remained closed. My girlfriend hadn't shown up. How could this be? Oh God, what if it had all been a dream? Had everything up until now been the delusion of a lonely, kissless vir—

“Hiromichi!”

“Uwahgah!”

A cold sensation crawled up the nape of my neck, and I whirled around in response. There was the girl I'd been dying to see—my girlfriend, standing there with a soft drink in each hand and an innocent smile on her face. The features of her beautiful face stood out quite a bit, framed by slightly damp hair that trailed down to her collarbones. She was slightly shorter than me, with long, slender legs. All in all, she was the rare sort of beauty you could find on the cover of any teen magazine. And yes, she was my girlfriend, Haruka Saikawa.

Th-Thank God. It wasn't a delusion. Since I'd pigeon-holed myself into the forever alone club, I often grew worried that my reality had become a little too convenient. I mean, why else would a beauty like Haruka go out with a nobody like me?

“Ahaha,” laughed Haruka. “Did I surprise you? Sorry for the wait. Practice dragged on longer than I'd expected. Here, take this drink—my humble offering as a way of saying sorry.”

“No, no, don't worry. I just got here.”



“Doesn’t look that way to me,” Haruka said after a pause, staring pointedly at the desk littered with my notebooks and textbooks.

Crap. She was spot-on. Based on the current state of things, there was no way I could have “just gotten here.” If I’d considered that for even a moment, I wouldn’t have told her such an obvious lie. Why did I feel the need to act cool over every little thing? I tended to freak out whenever I was around Haruka, and it was like my body and brain would cease to function. Talk about embarrassing; I could feel my cheeks growing warmer by the second.

“You’re so kind, Hiromichi.”

Haruka didn’t laugh at me for feeling flustered, though. How could I not adore someone so nice? She had not only a pretty face, but also a great personality. I must have done a million good deeds in my past life in order to deserve such a flawless beauty for a girlfriend.

Cheers to you, past self.

“Well then, shall we head out?” Haruka asked.

“Y-Yeah. I’ll put my stuff away in a jiffy!”

“There’s no need to rush.”

“Got it.”

Having said that, I still quickly stuffed my textbooks and writing utensils into my bag. With Haruka at my side, I wouldn’t let these textbooks waste another moment of my time. Plus, we had something special planned for later today.

We left the study room together, walking side-by-side down the sunset-lit corridor and chatting about this and that. All in all, speaking to her was a lot like speaking to my guy friends. The main difference was that we would also discuss our date plans for the weekend like a proper couple would. We went over what had occurred at school earlier and what we’d watched on television last night. I had lent her a few volumes of my favorite manga, and I was eager to hear her impressions on it and gush about it myself. We also discussed various other topics, like the team of four we’d assembled with my guy friends to play Splat Two.

“The club president and teacher have been giving me a lot of praise lately,” she revealed.

“Really? Like what?”

“According to them, my performances have more depth now. They said I’m no longer a huge ham—I’m a honey-glazed ham now!”

“You consider that praise?” I asked hesitantly.

“Ahaha. It’s better than a half-hearted critique, right?”

“I mean, you’re not wrong.”

Haruka’s mother, who had left her family after a divorce, had once been an (unpopular) actress. Apparently, Haruka had decided to follow in her footsteps by joining the drama club, although she—in

her own words—was terrible at acting. It was obvious she loved it, however. Whenever I went to watch her practice, she was always giving it her all. Her sweat-drenched hair would stick to her cheeks, and her eyes would shine brightly with a brilliant flame of passion. Whenever I saw her trying so hard, I couldn't just reduce her love for acting to an "ill-suited obsession." Regardless of whether she was skilled or not, she loved to do it; that was the most important thing.

For that reason, I enjoyed hearing Haruka talk about her club activities. Those who gave their all at something were admirable, in my opinion, and even more so if they happened to be your adorable significant other. I could listen to Haruka go on forever, and she was the type of girl who could keep a conversation going indefinitely. Since I wanted to share so much with her, our time always ran out before our conversation could exhaust itself.

But today was different.

As we approached the school gate, the two of us ended up falling silent. We stopped in our tracks, gazing furtively at the destined spot. Yesterday, we'd exchanged an important promise, and this location served as its boundary line.

When I glanced at Haruka, our eyes met, but rather than entangling, our gazes came undone. She'd averted her eyes with an embarrassed expression. Still, she cautiously extended her right hand toward me.

That's right. A month had passed since we'd started dating.

We'd discussed ideas on how to grow closer, and we finally came up with a brilliant solution. Today marked a special day—we decided we'd hold hands for the first time! I mustered all of my courage and... and grabbed hold of Haruka's delicate, pale hand!

Whoaaaa! Th-This is a girl's hand?!

Upon feeling our fingers intertwine, my heart practically leapt out of my chest. The difference between her hand and a guy's was like night and day—hers was thin, soft, and, most importantly, incredibly smooth. The stark contrast and unusual sensations caused my heart to pound, and I wondered how Haruka felt in this moment. When I glanced over at her, I noticed her cheeks reddening slightly.

"Ehehe..." Haruka giggled. "This is sorta embarrassing, isn't it?"

"Y-You think?" I managed to respond with a squeak.

I see. So Haruka also felt embarrassed—at least slightly.

This should go without saying, but I was far more than just a "little" embarrassed. I was so nervous that a mysterious falsetto had leapt out of my throat, making me sound like a mangled cat.

When we'd first started dating, just being in her vicinity had turned me into a stiff, nervous wreck. I'd clearly managed to beat that cowardice out of myself, but I still had a long way to go. As an

obvious example, pretty much anything that brought attention to our romantic relationship caused my composure to fall to pieces.

How did the popular guys do it? They could get all handsy with girls they weren't even dating. What were they, shape-shifting aliens with nerves of steel?

As I considered the possibility, Haruka spoke up. "I'm sorry. Taking a whole month just to hold hands is weird, right? But this is my first time being in this sort of relationship with a boy. I get so nervous..."

Her face clouded over, and she seemed apologetic. It appeared as though she'd interpreted my silence as me being in a bad mood.

Don't get the wrong idea, Haruka! I was just such an anxiety-ridden mess that I couldn't think of what to say!

I hurried to give a proper response. "No, I feel the same way. In fact, going any faster would be exhausting. Sure, you could say it took a whole month to hold hands, but it only took one month, right? I think we're moving at an awesome pace! I mean, if we can hold hands after one month, how well will we get along for the rest of our lives?"

"Squee!" Haruka exclaimed, turning an even deeper shade of crimson. It was as if a fire had been lit beneath her face—likewise, her hand grew distinctly warmer.

Did... Did I just say something really gross and creepy? Damn it, I definitely did! "For the rest of our lives?!" Pull yourself together, Hiromichi! We're still in high school, for God's sake! Why'd I have to jump the gun?

"I didn't mean that!" I cried. "Wait, uh, I did mean it! I just, uh, got a little ahead of myself. I was only talking about 'the rest of our lives' in terms of my feelings, okay? It's not that deep! I just thought, 'It'd be pretty nice if that happened,' and I ended up blurting it out! That's all!"

Ah, crap. I've ruined everything. No matter what I said, I was only covering up repulsiveness with more repulsiveness—a creep matryoshka. How was I supposed to dig myself out of this hole? At this rate, Haruka would see me as some weird, delusional asshole and leave me for good.

"No," Haruka assured me. "I'm happy you said that."

She squeezed my hand tighter in response and leaned against my left arm with a smile. This wasn't the sincere, innocent smile that she showed to my friends. No, this was a special smile that she only showed to me—her boyfriend.

"I told you people have been praising my acting recently, right?" Haruka continued. "It must be thanks to you, Hiromichi."

"What?"

"Ever since we started dating, each day has been so fun. I've

never felt so happy in my life. The world is so much more dazzling than before—it's not even a fair comparison. It's like feelings of tenderness and strength I had no idea existed are overflowing from my heart. Until now, I never knew how wonderful it was to have someone on this massive earth care about you so deeply. So, thank you. Thank you for choosing me, Hiromichi. I really, really like you!"

"Squee..."

Yeah, it was clear to me now—I'd been born into this world to meet Haruka. No other girl could ever accept me so earnestly or value the same things as I did to such a profound extent. At this point, I couldn't think of anything but her.

Haruka remained nestled against me until we parted at the train station. Since we were both nervous, we couldn't hold a proper conversation. From where our bodies were connected, I could feel Haruka's heart beating as loudly and as frantically as mine. Even so, we never separated. The moment lasted for 15 minutes. Without a doubt, those were the greatest 15 minutes of my 17 years on this earth.

And yet, everything would soon change. I would end up meeting a person who would turn everything on its head—my newfound conviction to remain loyal to Haruka, and the plans for our youth that I'd believed would never end.

Chapter Two

Bewilderment X Contact

There was a rather desolate commuter town three stops away from my school. Its decidedly retro downtown area looked like it was stuck in the '80s while the world had moved on without it. It was here that an old, wooden, two-story apartment building stood. And inside that building, a single room served as the Satou family's "castle."

Upon entering the premises, I could hear a phone ringing from the second floor—in other words, from my apartment. As the stout, older woman who lived next door glared down at me, I raced up the steel-frame staircase, which had long since fallen into resembling a rusted hunk of swiss cheese. When I finally reached the second floor, the old woman remarked scathingly, "It's been ringing for 10 minutes straight."

Seriously? Why are they being so persistent? It had better be a damn emergency. I bowed my head to the old woman in apology, raced inside the apartment, and yanked the hallway phone from its cradle.

"Hello?! Who the hell might this be?!" I barked, doing nothing to hide my displeasure.

"You finally picked up! It's me! Your incredible father!"

"Gah! I should have known it was my bastard of an old man!"

The perpetrator of these passionate, lovesick calls was my father—Naoyuki Satou. Knowing this, my tone grew even more irritated.

"Dad, you know that our apartment has zero soundproofing," I nagged. "If I don't answer, call again later. You're bothering the neighbors."

"Hahaha! Sorry, sorry. I just got this weird desire to hear your voice out of nowhere!"

"Ugh, why are you being such a creep?"

"There's nothing creepy about a father worrying about his precious, one-and-only son. So how are things? Are you feeling well? Having fun at school?"

Oh crap. I should have known.

I had a sudden sinking feeling in my stomach. This was all too familiar. Prior experiences warned me that my dad was trying to hide something, much like when a child tried to cover up a bad report card from their parents. Well, it was an apt comparison for him—despite being in his late 40s, my old man still acted like an elementary schooler sometimes. Probably because he was off chasing dinosaurs.

In any case, I needed to hang up as soon as possible.

“Yeah, I’m doing well and having fun,” I said. “Nothing could be better. Does that take care of everything? Good night, sleep tight, and don’t let the bedbugs bite!”

“Wait, wait, wait! Hold on a second! Don’t hang up!” my dad frantically jumped in. “If you hang up, I’ll call again! That phone’s gonna keep on ringing until you pick up! I did want to hear your voice, but I actually have something important to discuss with you today!”

You got me, you sly bastard. Since I wanted to avoid the neighbor’s glare, I briefly entertained the idea of pulling out the phone line altogether. That would have been going too far, though. Alright, I’ll hear him out.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” I said. “So what is it?”

“Well, about that... Hmm...” he mumbled.

“What’s up? It must be really important, huh?”

“Not exactly, but acting so formal makes things awkward. Er, maybe ‘embarrassing’ is the right word.”

“Gross. I don’t want to hear a middle-aged man talking like some bashful, love-struck teen girl gushing about her first crush. Spit it out already. It can’t be anything good anyway. I’m guessing you’ve spent Grandma’s money on another excavation and want me to apologize to her?”

“Actually, I’ve gotten remarried.”

“See, that’s exactly what I th—wait, what the hell did you say?!”

I felt so completely overwhelmed that a scream had unintentionally leaped from my throat. A moment later, someone banged on the opposite side of the thin wall that served to separate the neighboring rooms. I responded to the old woman’s protest with a loud apology and returned my attention to the conversation.

“R-Remarried?!” I cried. “As in, you got hitched?! When?! Wait, you never even mentioned having a partner!”

“Yeah, I met her in the city I’m currently working in.”

“In Fukuoka? But you’ve only been there for two months, right?!”

“As a wee little high schooler, you might not understand yet, but sometimes, the flames of love can ignite in an instant.”

Seriously? One spark, and you can go from zero to married in two months? I found that incredibly difficult to believe; in fact, it scared me more than anything. How much could you truly learn about someone in the span of only two months? The inner machinations of adults were still a mystery to me, I suppose.

“So that’s all you called to tell me about?” I asked. “Well, it’s your life, Dad. So long as you chose her, I’m okay with anyone.”

“I’m happy to hear you say that... and that was one of the things I called you about, but there was something else I wanted to discuss

with you today.”

“What is it?”

“I wanted to tell you about Tsukiko’s—my wife’s—child from another marriage.”

“Child from another marriage? She’s already a mother?!”

“At our age, it’s not that uncommon. I mean, even I have you.”

“Y-Yeah, I guess so. Guess that means I have a new sibling.”

“Exactly. And just like you, your new sibling is a junior in high school. Is she your little sister or big sister...? Oh, since you were born in April, that would make her your little sister. So anyway, Shigure—your new sibling—will be moving into our apartment as of today.”

“Hold on! What the hell did you just say?!”

Once again, the wall shook, and for a second time, I ended up having to apologize. Due to my distress, however, my words of appeasement lacked any sincere emotion.

“Hiromichi,” my father scolded me. “No need to shout over every little thing. You’ll disturb the neighbors.”

“Right now, I’m the most disturbed person in the entire world! For the love of God, what the hell is going on?! You suddenly call to tell me you’ve gotten remarried, your new wife has a daughter the same age as me, and we’re going to be living together immediately?! I can’t deal with this! I mean, for one thing, this apartment doesn’t even have proper rooms!”

I lived in an incredibly modest one-room apartment. There was my makeshift “room,” complete with an eat-in kitchen, and a sliding screen that separated my father’s cluttered “room” from mine. I was using his space as a storage for now, but both sides were already incredibly cramped. Sure, it was a decent enough living situation for one person in an old, wooden complex, but there just wasn’t enough space for two new inhabitants.

“In that case, clear out my room, and let her use it,” my dad said. “Throw everything out except for your mother’s mementos.”

“Say I threw everything out. Our apartment is still too small for all of us! Two parents and two kids in this small-ass place would mean we’d be packed together like sardines. Plus, they’re girls—they’re probably bringing a lot of stuff.”

“Huh? Oh, you’ve got it all wrong. Starting today, only Shigure—your little sister—will be joining you. Tsukiko and I will be heading to America.”

What? Are you kidding me?!

“Originally, I wanted to return home with Tsukiko and Shigure,” my dad explained. “But a professor from my college years begged for my help, so I’m going to assist him with an excavation in America. I’m about to get on the plane, actually! Can you imagine what would’ve

happened if you hadn't picked up the phone? Shigure's heading over there right now, actually—good thing you're expecting her! Hahaha."

"Wait! There's nothing 'good' about this! I'm seriously freaking out right now! You want me to live alone with a girl the same age as me? All by ourselves?! In this apartment?! You can't be serious!"

Ugh, gross! My hand's sweating all over the phone!

"What are you so shaken up about?" my dad asked. "It's not like you're a virgin!"

"I am a virgin, Dad! Your son is still squeaky clean! I've never even been kissed! Why do you have so much faith in me, huh? You dumbass!"

"O-Oh. I see. Well, anyway, she is your little sister. There's no need to be formal."

"A little sister I've never seen or met before—in other words, a complete and total stranger! You can't expect me to be cool with this. Tell that girl to go back to her old home right now!"

"Oh, crap. I just heard the boarding announcement. Well then, I'm off! I won't be home for at least a year, so you two enjoy yourselves, okay? Love ya!"

"Hold it! This conversation is far from—"

Click! Beep, beep, beep...

"Dad...? Dad, you friggin' asshole!" I yelled as I slammed the phone back into its cradle. Of course, the neighbor protested by slamming the wall with all her might, but I couldn't be bothered to apologize anymore.

I was so perplexed that I could practically feel my brain spinning around inside my skull like an old vinyl record. My knees grew weak, and I slumped to the ground. This was a mess. The mess of all messes. Sure, we were officially considered siblings on paper, but I'd suddenly be living with a girl I knew nothing about. And, to make matters even worse, our parents wouldn't be returning home for a whole year. I'd considered the possibility before, but could my old man genuinely be insane? Did he have no moral compass?

And on top of that, he didn't feel the need to tell me until today?!

I was happy about my dad's remarriage, honestly. Following my mom's death, he had somehow managed to raise me all by himself. If he'd found a new partner, I wanted to celebrate that. Having said that...

"This is a disaster," I grumbled out loud to myself.

What's the deal with him? What kind of crappy father springs this sort of situation on his son instead of letting him process the whole deal?

I sighed. The situation felt like a bad joke, not to mention it was a joke that was only going to continue. While I sat here, my sister—

who had never seen my face before—was steadily approaching the apartment. That meant that I couldn't stay slumped heap on the ground forever.

"Either way, I should clean up this room before she gets here," I declared to myself.

I needed to do something about my dad's space and the living room, the latter of which had become my nest. I never put the futon away, my dirty clothes littered the ground, and the lewd manga magazines I'd borrowed from Takeshi were lying out in the open for anyone to see. I couldn't let a girl into such a dark and sinister man cave—that had to be against the law, right?

Just as I began to get to my feet, the doorbell rang.

"Crap!"

Sh-She's already here?

I hadn't even put away the lewd magazines yet! Maybe it was the old woman next door? I had been loud over the phone a minute ago, so perhaps she was trying to barge in uninvited to give me a piece of her mind. Or it could have been the newspaper or the public broadcasting tax collector.

Well, I guess I'll go take a look.

I would decide how to respond based on who it was. With that in mind, I looked through the door's peephole.

"Huh?" I gasped in utter shock.

Everything that had been occupying my stupid primate brain until that moment—what I needed to do to prepare, how I ought to act, and what I should have been thinking about—was blown away, leaving my mind completely blank. It felt as though my feet had left the ground, as if gravity had disappeared from under me.

Yes, within an instant, what I'd witnessed through the peephole had caused my thoughts and emotions to freeze. But who could blame me? On the other side of the door stood Haruka Saikawa—my girlfriend who I had just parted with at the station.

Wh-Why?

Why was Haruka in front of my apartment? And of all times, why had she chosen now?

I still hadn't told Haruka where I lived. Sure, I'd told her the nearest station, but since I'd never brought her here, she shouldn't have known where I lived. Had she followed me here? No, she'd gotten on the train first. That shouldn't have been possible.

Then why is she here right now?

In the midst of my confusion, I racked my brain. I noticed Haruka acting flustered through the peephole, seemingly at a loss. She constantly glanced between her surroundings, her smartphone, and the door plate for verification. The usual vitality that graced her face

was nowhere to be seen. Instead, she appeared utterly helpless as she fidgeted restlessly on the spot.

I can't just stand here. What was I doing, allowing my girlfriend to make such an expression? It suddenly became all too obvious to me—all I needed to do was ask Haruka why she'd come to my apartment.

Anyway, I need to go out there now.

I undid the lock, which I'd fastened from behind upon returning home, and apologized from behind the door. "S-Sorry. I'll be out in a second... Huh?"

Once I found myself face-to-face in front of Haruka, I lost the ability to speak again.

"Oh, you're home!" she cried. "Thank goodness. I was starting to panic, wondering if I'd gotten the wrong room."

Something was off. I hadn't been able to tell through the peephole, but once I saw her with my own two eyes, it all finally made sense.



The girl in front of me who was wearing a relieved expression wasn't Haruka. Still, you'd be hard-pressed to think otherwise—everything about her, from her hairstyle down to her long legs, resembled my girlfriend to a tee. In spite of this, the way in which she looked at me was different. In the case of Haruka, I always noted a certain sparkle in her eyes. From that single difference, I knew instantly this wasn't my girlfriend.

And with that realization, it was as if a veil had suddenly been lifted. Things I hadn't noticed until now were suddenly visible. For starters, she was wearing different clothes. Underneath her brightly-colored cardigan, she wore a sailor outfit, but it wasn't Seion High's uniform. She also wore loafers, not Haruka's usual sneakers. And the most glaring difference was what she was carrying—she held a supermarket bag in one hand and a large suitcase behind her.

In this situation, even a dumbass like me knew there was only one possibility.

“Um, is something wrong?” the girl asked. “Is there something on my face?”

“Are you... my new stepsister?”

“Yep! Nice to meet you. I'm Shigure Oeyama. Whoops... I guess I'm Shigure Satou now, aren't I? I'm Tsukiko Satou's daughter, and, starting today, I'm also your new stepsister. Here's to the future, Big Bro.”

X X X

My father had suddenly remarried, and, in the blink of an eye, my stepsister and I were living in the same apartment by ourselves. The shock of my father's phone call had left me powerless and writhing on the ground. And yet, somehow, that had only been the icing on the shit cake I found myself in. The real cherry on top was the shocking twist that my stepsister was the spitting image of my girlfriend.

This isn't good. No, it's terrible. Absolutely horrendous. I can't even.

I'd be living with a girl who looked exactly like my girlfriend. God, what had I done to deserve such a cruel fate? I could practically sense a mysterious entity's malicious intent lurking behind my back. How was I supposed to deal with the reality that stared me directly in the face?!

These repeated upheavals had left my emotions completely torn and frayed. While I stood at my doorway, utterly dumbfounded, Haruka's doppelganger spoke to me anxiously.

“Um, you heard that I was coming today, right?”

“Y-Yeah,” I replied. “I did hear about that... a minute ago.”

“A minute ago?! Talk about abrupt. Still, I’m glad you got the message. Um, may I ask your name, Big Bro? I did hear it from my mom, but I must’ve forgotten.”

“Um, I’m Hiromichi Satou.”

“Hiromichi, then?”

“Ugh. I’d prefer if you... didn’t call me that,” I muttered. Having Haruka’s lookalike also address me by my given name was dangerous for my sanity.

“How about I just stick to ‘Big Bro?’” she asked with an odd, inscrutable expression. “That would be easier for me, too. Well, now that we’ve finished our introductions, would you kindly let me in?”

“Uh, no. Wait here a sec.”

“Huh? How come?”

Crap.

I’d mistook her for Haruka and ended up opening the door, but the room was still a disaster. I couldn’t let her in right now, so I spread my arms out and rushed to block the entrance.

“Like I said, I didn’t get the call until just a minute ago,” I explained. “The apartment’s still pretty messy. Do you mind waiting here for a little bit?”

“Oh, is that all? No worries. We’ll be together from now on, after all. I’ll help you clean up. I’m coming in!” she replied, brushing past my defenses and entering the apartment.

“Ah! H-Hold on a second!” I cried as I frantically followed her.

Since a loser like me couldn’t exactly shove a girl he’d just met, I had no way of guarding against her invasion. Of course, grabbing her delicate shoulders and pulling her back outside was completely out of the question, as well. Given how modest my lodgings were, the hallway at the front was rather short. The moment you failed to make the first move, catching up became impossible. Still, even though it was too late to chase after her, I definitely needed to hide the incriminating magazines before she found them.

Unfortunately, she’d already walked into the living room and immediately looked down to find a lewd magazine I’d left wide open for the world to behold.

“Heh,” she snorted.

Agh! She’d laughed! She’d definitely laughed at me just now—right through her nose even! Like a child mocking some dumb apes at the zoo!

Aaah... I want to curl up and die.

“Oh, sorry about that,” she apologized. “It was just my mom and I for a long time, so I’d completely forgotten about this sort of thing.

But, yeah—I guess this is a boy’s apartment, after all. It’s obvious there would be things you wouldn’t want a girl to see. Sorry, I didn’t mean to embarrass you or anything. I was being careless.”

“Thank you for understanding,” I muttered under my breath after a pause. Kindness really could be incredibly painful sometimes.

“Well, I guess I’ll let you clean the room,” my stepsister said. “And while you do that, I’ll prepare dinner. You haven’t eaten yet, have you?”

“No, I haven’t. Thanks.”

“You’d better look forward to dinner with bated breath! I’m a pretty good cook, I’ll have you know.”

She pulled out a frilly apron with a white-and-pink checkered pattern from her suitcase, put it on, and immediately got to work in the kitchen. In between my frantic attempts to tidy up, I’d take quick glimpses at her.

Just as she’d implied, her cooking skills looked to be impressive—she appeared to be right at home in the new kitchen. The comforting sounds of a simmering pot and the rhythmic chopping of vegetables flowed from the kitchen area. Occasionally, I’d even manage to catch bits of lovely humming. For all intents and purposes, it was as if Haruka herself were in the kitchen, and it caused my heart to leap out of my chest.

Wait a second, you asshole. What the hell was I thinking? Would any girl do as long as they had the same face? Mistaking my stepsister for Haruka—my wonderful, irreplaceable girlfriend—was an extremely dangerous delusion. And what exactly lies at the end of that delusion, genius? No matter how I approached the situation, I knew it would only end in destruction. Because the two girls looked so alike, they’d unconsciously overlapped in my head.

“There are three people in the world who look exactly like you,” was a common saying. What were the odds that two of them existed within my rather small, pathetic social circle? At this point, I needed to consider moving somewhere else by myself. Seriously.

As I was busy mentally freaking out, my stepsister spoke up, her back still turned while she cooked. “You got a call about me a little while ago, right? Was it from my stepfather?”

“Yeah. He told me at the very last minute that you’d be coming to live here,” I replied.

“Ahaha. That must’ve been shocking, learning about me just before I got here.”

“That’s putting it mildly. My dad can be a real asshole sometimes. I feel bad for your mom—she can’t be having an easy time with him either.”

Shigure went silent for a moment, then retorted in a sharp tone,

“I don’t mean to sound rude, but she’s your mother now, too.”

She sounded upset—more so than she had so far. I’d been so preoccupied with cleaning that I’d been staring at my hands while I talked, but now I glanced up at her. I found her glaring down at me with a displeased expression, her eyebrows raised.

Huh? Is she mad at me?

“I’m not just talking about myself here, but my mother, too,” she said. “You haven’t even referred to me by name since I arrived here. Call me ‘Shigure.’ You are my brother, after all.”

“Y-Yeah, but...”

“What, do you think you’re the only one who’s struggling with suddenly having a new sibling?”

“Huh?”

“Look, even I’m forcing myself to make the best out of this. It’s not fair that you get to grumble and sulk to yourself without putting any work in.”

“Ah!” I gasped.

She was right on the money. Regardless of the circumstances, no one would be able to suddenly accept a complete stranger into their home, much less into their family. And as a girl, her anxiety must have been incomparable to mine. Still, she’d been trying to open up to me, even if only on a surface level. Just like she’d said, she was trying her best to meet me halfway. And what had I been doing this whole time? I’d just been hosting a pity party for one, worrying about my own circumstances.

“Get it together, Hiromichi!” I yelled, slapping my face for emphasis.

“Huh?! Why’d you just slap yourself, Big Bro?! Your cheeks are bright red! Seriously, how hard did you hit yourself?!”

“No worries. I’m okay now,” I reassured her.

“You don’t look ‘okay’ at all! Have you lost your mind or something?!”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m fine,” I stressed. It was exactly what a serious Loser—with a capital “L”—like me needed to wake up.

It would be easy to just sit idly by the sidelines and let others lead the way, but those weren’t the actions of a true brother. Okay, it was true that I’d never had a sibling before, so my “brotherly qualities” were simply traits I’d conjured up on the spot. Nevertheless, if I was gonna end up being someone’s sibling, I sure as hell didn’t want to be a pathetic one.

“My bad,” I apologized. “I’ll be more careful from here on out, Sh-Shigure.”

It had been somewhat embarrassing, but I’d managed to say her name. Given my lack of experience in the department, calling girls by

their first name still made me nervous. But when her expression quickly changed to happiness and relief, it made me feel as though it had been worth it.

“Great!” she exclaimed with a smile that looked exactly like Haruka’s.

My heart pounded in my chest. But this was my problem, meaning I had to get used to it. Rejecting Shigure just because I was too much of a wimp to handle everything going on right now would be extremely disrespectful to both her and Haruka.

“Dinner’s ready,” Shigure stated. “Do you mind pulling out the tea table, Big Bro?”

“No problem, Shigure.”

“Hey, is that the second time? You’ve mastered the art of saying my name already. That’s fantastic—I need you to become my older brother in mind and body as soon as possible. That way, you can spoil your adorable little sister absolutely rotten!”

Her smile, which had been an exact replica of Haruka’s until that moment, suddenly twisted and transformed. She wore a provocative, teasing grin. Although I couldn’t imagine my girlfriend wearing that expression, Shigure seemed quite accustomed to it. I internally felt a sense of relief at the obvious difference between the two.

If only I had known better.

Chapter Three

Strip X Tease

“Man, my fingers are worn out. I’ve never used scissors for so long,” I complained out loud.

While Shigure was in the bathroom cleaning the bathtub, I was preparing her new living space.

I was currently in the entryway, juggling bags of garbage from my dad’s room. Since he’d instructed me to throw out everything except for my mom’s mementos, I’d stuffed everything in the near vicinity into said trash bags. Unfortunately, I couldn’t just cram his clothes in there as they were. Due to a certain rule in this area, I needed to cut them up as finely as possible before I could add them to the burnable trash pile.

The fabric scissors I struggled with were a memento of my mom’s. I cut my dad’s clothes—all of which had dinosaur prints—into small strips of gaudy cloth. And just as the base of my fingers started to cramp up, I finally finished the job.

That was one thing down, and about a dozen more to go.

“That still leaves the curtain,” I grumbled to myself. A little earlier, I’d ended up unearthing an enormous curtain from the closet. Dealing with that would be a major pain in the ass, and since my fingers were already exhausted, I decided to take a short break.

I gazed pensively at the mountain of trash piled up in the entryway. We had all sorts of garbage: burnable, unburnable, bulk, and more. Then there was the issue of my dad’s dinosaur figures. I considered asking for Shigure’s help in taking these to a pawn shop—hopefully they could provide us with a little extra money for the household.

As I was busy mulling things over, Shigure suddenly called out to me. “Big Bro! We’ve got a problem.”

“What is it? Do you not know how to heat the bath?” I asked.

“No issues there. My old place had the same setup.”

“Then what’s up?”

“Well, here’s the thing—I just noticed that this apartment doesn’t have a changing room!”

Oh, yeah.

This apartment’s bathroom was directly connected to the wood-paneled section of the kitchen. Likewise, there was no door between the kitchen and living room, the latter of which also served as my bedroom. In short, the bathroom was directly connected to my bedroom. Since the household had consisted of just me and Dad until

then, it hadn't really mattered and ended up completely slipping my mind. But now that Shigure was here, the lack of a changing room was a huge problem.

"Don't we have a curtain rail in there, though?" I asked.

"Um... There is one, but there's nothing hanging from it."

"Maybe we can use this, then?" I asked, holding up the curtain I was initially planning to throw away.

If it were usable, I wouldn't have to cut it up—I'd take care of two birds with one stone. I hung the curtain from the rail and checked its length.

Hmm, it's kinda short.

The width was fine, but the hem hung a little over a foot from the ground. Still, this would have to suffice for the time being.

"Your knees will show, but at least it's dark; that means it's not see-through," I said. "Are you comfortable using this for now?"

"I don't mind, but will you be all right with that?" she asked.

"Huh? I'm a guy. We don't really sweat that sort of thing."

"Hmm, really now?" she replied with the same mocking grin she wore before. A slight chill ran down my spine when I saw it. Just as I thought, it was nothing like an expression Haruka would ever make.

"Wh-What's with that suggestive grin?" I squeaked.

"Nothing at all. If you don't have a problem with it, neither do I. Well, the bath's heated and ready to go. I'll jump in first."

"Take your time," I said, waving my hand lightly.

With that, I returned to the living room and turned on the television.

Man, I lucked out.

Since the curtain had found some sort of use, that meant I'd finished cleaning. After Shigure was finished with the bath, I could wash up, go to sleep, and pull the metaphorical curtain on the most exhausting day of my entire life. There were still things I needed to consider, but for the time being, everything was all right.

I sat in the living room and zoned out to the variety show I usually watched. Due to the layout of my apartment, I could catch glimpses of the bathroom from the corner of my eye. That was when I spotted Shigure removing her socks, revealing her thin legs and bare feet.

"Ah," I gasped, then quickly checked myself.

Wait, what am I getting so worked up over? I'd just seen her legs, right? I might've been a virgin, but I wasn't that pent up. Girls showed their bare legs off everywhere—both in the city and at school. It was hardly a rare sight. So why did I feel the urge to avert my gaze? I needed to get a grip—there was no reason to be so sheepish over a simple pair of legs. And with my rather flimsy, makeshift wall of

stubbornness erect, I forced myself to return my attention to the television.

Flop.

The skirt that Shigure had been wearing traveled down her legs before falling to the floor.

“Ugh!”

At that moment, I cursed my own thoughtlessness.

A little over one foot from the ground, huh?

Sure, I hadn’t seen anything too scandalous. The girls at school would often pull the waistbands of their skirts up to impossibly short lengths, revealing their thighs. They would show way more skin than what I’d witnessed just now. Despite that, this situation was completely different. The movement of Shigure’s pale legs and her falling clothes had relayed a vivid truth to me—just beyond the curtain, a girl with the same face as Haruka was slowly revealing her nude body one piece of clothing at a time.

Good lord, this had been a horrible miscalculation on my part. I hadn’t taken my incredibly active imagination into account. Based on the glimpse I’d caught from the small foot-long gap, my mind could easily fill in the rest.

Shit, what should I do? Go into my dad’s room behind the screen door?

No, that wouldn’t work. That room now belonged to Shigure. After we’d eaten dinner, she’d set about organizing her personal belongings in there. That meant I could no longer enter without permission.

Sh-Should I go hide in the restroom?

From the gap in the curtain, I witnessed Shigure’s hands sliding down her legs, pulling down a thin, white piece of cloth. That small slip of fabric was it—the straw that broke the camel’s back, and my body slumped over the tea table. My heart was pounding so loudly, I thought my eardrums might burst from within.

All right, that settles it. Tomorrow for sure.

The following day, I would go to the hardware store and buy a curtain; a proper one that trailed all the way to the ground. By God, I would lay claim to that holy artifact, come hell or high water!

“Umm, excuse me,” Shigure spoke up. “Are you there, Big Bro?”

“Whoa! Wh-What’s up?!”

As I jerked my head up, Shigure poked her face out from the corner of the curtain and studied me suspiciously.

“What are you freaking out over?” she asked.

“I-I’m not freaking out! I was just taking a nap, and hearing your voice startled me! So, what’s up?” I desperately tried to cover for myself.

“Sorry to disturb your sleep, but could you fetch me the shampoo and conditioner from my suitcase? I forgot to grab them before coming in here.”

“Y-You’re cool with me opening your bag?”

“Of course. I’ve already put away my underwear and the like. No need to worry about that.”

“G-Got it.”

Virtually fleeing from Shigure’s gaze, I entered her room and retrieved two pink bottles from the suitcase lying against the wall. I took several deep breaths in an attempt to calm my nerves. When it was clear that hadn’t helped in the slightest, I decided to feign composure instead. I returned to the living room with the best poker face I could muster and handed the two bottles over to Shigure.

“Eheh,” she giggled with a suggestive grin. “Thank you ever so much, Big Bro.”

“Wh-Why are you making that face?”

“What? Oh, it’s nothing. Nothing at all.”

Shigure retreated back inside the curtain. I heard the bathroom door open and close. After I’d returned to the safety of the tea table, I let out a massive sigh.

What was with that expression just now?

Despite the uncanny resemblance to Haruka, such an odd smile would never appear on my girlfriend’s face. With that provocative expression fresh in my mind, Shigure’s earlier words resurfaced and repeated themselves.

“I don’t mind, but will you be all right with that?” she had asked.

Perhaps Shigure had known how I’d react. Despite knowing that she’d become the subject of my vulgar fantasies, she hadn’t even remotely attempted to put a stop to things. The very concept sent a shiver down my spine, causing alarm bells to go off in my head.

Could she be trying to...?

“Nope, stop right there. Don’t jump to conclusions,” I scolded myself out loud. I couldn’t make any assumptions about her simply based on my own imagination. After all, Shigure had done her best to meet me halfway. I was a complete stranger who had just become her brother as of a few hours ago. There was no need to play the victim based on zero evidence.

Brushing aside the sinister premonition that had arisen in the back of my mind, I decided to distract myself by studying. I placed my notebooks atop the tea table and began preparing for tomorrow’s lessons.

I always studied in my free time—there was never a downside to learning new things, regardless of what they were. I would say that was the only good lesson my bastard of an old man had ever instilled

in me. Whenever I focused on my notebooks, irrelevant thoughts disappeared from my mind. Through being so absorbed in the material, I managed to regain my composure.

“I ended up sweating a ton today from the move,” Shigure sighed. “Nothing like hot water to make you feel better. The bath is all yours now.”

“All right, then. I’ll hop in soon,” I replied automatically. Until she’d spoken to me, I hadn’t even noticed Shigure return from the bathroom. Studying had never once failed me—thanks, Dad.

I unfolded my legs and stood up, then promptly froze in place.

In the blink of an eye, I’d lost the ability to move. It felt as though ice had replaced the blood that flowed through my veins, and yet, at the same time, my red-hot face threatened to burst into flames at any second. But who could blame me? After all, when I’d finally looked up, I’d found Shigure standing there in nothing but a bath towel!

“Wh-What the hell are you thinking, coming out here like that?!” I cried, unable to contain the frantically high pitch in my voice.

Shigure, on the other hand, merely cocked her head.



“What am I thinking?” she echoed in a puzzled voice. “Do you not wear a towel after getting out of the bath, Big Bro? Seems normal enough to me.”

“If this was your home, then sure, but—”

“This is my apartment, though,” she cut me off.

“Yeah! Yeah, you’re right, but hurry up and put some clothes on! Even blood-related siblings show more discretion at this age! Sure, we need to make a conscious effort to make things work out for both of us, but this is taking things way too far!”

“Heh... Teehee. Aha. Ahaha!” Shigure bent over and started laughing.

Wh-What’s with this girl?

“What’s so funny?!” I yelled.

“Don’t lose your head. Look, I’m wearing a camisole under the towel.”

“Huh?” I blurted out after a stupified pause.

Shigure threw open the front of her bath towel, revealing a thin camisole and shorts. Upon seeing my dumbfounded expression, she burst into laughter.

“Ahaha. What, you didn’t even notice the camisole’s straps? What a riot. Your mind’s been polluted by all that dirty manga, Big Bro. Even if we are stepsiblings, I’d never wear only a bath towel in front of a boy I’d just met—unfortunately, girls like that don’t exist in the three-dimensional world,” Shigure managed to spit out between peels of laughter, her shoulders shaking. All the while, that mean-spirited smile—which was the complete opposite of Haruka’s—was plastered on her face.

She can’t get away with this!

“You... You’ve crossed a line here,” I muttered angrily.

“Huh? I was just messing with you. Think of it like a kitten batting at your ankles, okay? Anyways, you certainly seemed to be getting all worked up by your lonesome.”

“But what if I’d gotten too worked up?” I pointed out. “What if I’d done something irredeemable? Yeah, I might be terrified of women, but I can’t make any promises.”

“Aha! What, so you have no confidence in your ability to stay level-headed? At least you’re honest. But you don’t need to worry about that.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Take a look at this,” she indicated. She picked up a piece of paper I’d left on the table for note-taking and tossed it into the air. Within the blink of an eye, she managed to split the floating leaflet in half with the world’s most precise roundhouse kick.

“There’s a good chance I’m a lot stronger than you, Big Bro,” she

stated confidently.

“Ugh...”

“So if you’re ever in the mood, feel free to come after me—I dare you. But just know one thing: I’ll fight back with everything I have.”

Shigure lifted one of her legs to demonstrate, making the already-sinfully short shorts roll up further. She patted her thigh as if to make a point, causing a pleasant slapping sound to ring out.

I should’ve known. Her little show just now had conveyed the presence of thoroughly developed muscles. Given her strength and agility, I wouldn’t be surprised if she was experienced in martial arts. In other words, Shigure had teased me knowing full well that she could easily overpower me. The premonition I’d felt earlier as a chill running down my spine had now transformed into a certainty.

“Even you’re forcing yourself to make this work, huh?” I repeated her words from earlier. “You’re nothing but a liar!”

“Oh, are my pants on fire?” she retorted.

“No, but you’re about to hang from a telephone wire!”

I was certain now—although she was outwardly identical to my sincere and innocent Haruka, she was the complete antithesis on the inside. Before, she’d compared herself to a kitten playfully batting at my ankles. That had been the perfect metaphor. Cats would purposefully keep their weakened prey alive—swiping at them with carefully retracted claws and soft nips—and turn them into playthings. Shigure fit that image perfectly.

“I’ve always wanted an older brother or sister,” she added.

“Someone who would listen to all of my selfish requests. Now that you have an adorable little sister, you’re going to spoil her absolutely rotten, aren’t you?”

A malicious aura radiated from Shigure’s smile—an expression far removed from my sweet Haruka. Without a doubt, this girl was a bully to her very core.

I’m screwed, aren’t I?

What would happen if this sadist ever found out that I had a girlfriend who looked exactly like her? Obviously, I’d be up shit creek without a paddle. I had no doubt in my mind that she’d find a way to take advantage of their resemblance and push things even further.

In the wake of a future that was all too vivid in my mind, I could no longer lie to myself—I was downright terrified.

Chapter Four

Good Morning X Consensus

The morning after the most shocking day of my entire life, a scent I couldn't quite identify beckoned me out of sleep. It turned out to be the smell of miso. I groggily turned my head to the kitchen and found my little sister wearing the same apron as last night. She was busy pouring the miso soup she'd made for dinner last night into a pot.

"Oh, good morning, Big Bro," she greeted.

"Ugh..."

Her smile was even warmer than the morning sunlight that streamed in through the windows. It reminded me of an expression my girlfriend would make, causing my heart to leap. To prevent them from overlapping again in my mind, I reminded myself of my stepsister's name.

"Good morning, Shigure."

"Did you sleep okay? Or did you end up tossing and turning all night with your poor little heart racing? I mean, only a single screen door separated you from your adorable little sister."

"I slept just fine, thanks," I retorted dryly.

"Really?" she giggled. "Well, that aside, I've finished making breakfast. I'm going to get the table set up, so I'd appreciate it if you put your futon away."

As instructed, I sluggishly dragged myself out of bed. My body felt like it'd been replaced with a sack of bricks. Sure, I'd claimed to have "slept just fine," but that had been a complete lie. Could anyone really blame me? I'd spent the night a few feet away from a girl who was the spitting image of my girlfriend, a thin screen door the only barrier between us. That would've unsettled anyone.

Even so, I hadn't been conscious of the fact for very long. Before we'd gone to sleep, I'd learned about Shigure's true nature. She and Haruka were like night and day in that respect, regardless of how similar they looked. It had been a blessing, in a way—their opposite personalities helped me to view them as different people.

In fact, I could see myself getting along with Shigure as family. At the same time, the idea of this dominatrix learning about Haruka filled me with uneasiness. So, no, I hadn't lost any sleep over Shigure—I'd been up all night worrying about my girlfriend.

How am I going to explain this situation to Haruka?

It was a doozy of a problem, and one that I couldn't exactly hide from. What would Haruka think, knowing that I—her boyfriend—

lived with her spitting image? To make matters worse, I had no power to do anything about the situation.

Still, I was confident that if I just talked to Haruka, she would understand. I needed to let her know about Shigure as soon as possible—and not via some wimpy text message or anything like that. It needed to be in person. After several agonizing hours of tossing and turning last night, I'd arrived at the conclusion that I'd tell her about it during lunch time today.

I'd finally managed to fall asleep well past 2:00AM. No wonder my body felt so heavy.

Rubbing my tired eyes, I put away the futon and sat myself down at the dining table. For breakfast, we had steaming-hot white rice, leftover miso soup, golden fried eggs, and minced cabbage. I hadn't enjoyed a warm, freshly made breakfast in years—probably not since my mom had passed away.

"Thanks," I said. "We'll need to decide on shifts for chores and stuff."

"If you don't mind my asking, what did you do for breakfast while you still lived alone?" she asked.

"I either ate leftover bread or nothing at all."

"No surprise there. Yeah, you're not going anywhere near the food. Instead of shifts, I think it'd be better if we divided the housework. I'll handle the cooking and the laundry. You can take out the garbage and wash the dishes. How does that sound?"

"I'm cool with it if you are," I replied.

"Well, that settles that!"

As we continued deciding on our specific roles around the house, I helped myself to the breakfast she'd prepared. I'd already gotten a brief taste of it last night, but her cooking was spectacular. Yesterday's main dish had been salmon grilled with a generous sprinkling of salt. This morning, we were enjoying hearty plates of fried eggs and miso soup. I hadn't expected there to be much room for innovation in what she'd cooked, but there was still a world of difference between Shigure's meals and what I'd managed to slap together on occasion.

The salmon last night had been pleasantly moist and had possessed a rich sweetness. Likewise, the eggs had been cooked just enough to still be runny. The miso soup was equally as appetizing. It was fragrant, and each mouthful was a textural delight—finely cut enoki mushrooms added a pliant resistance to the otherwise unassuming dish.

All in all, her culinary abilities were quite impressive. If Shigure had been my little sister during my single days, I would've turned out as one hell of a degenerate older brother, no doubt about it.

While I piled heaps of praise on her cooking, Shigure set down

her chopsticks and spoke up. “By the way, I have something important to discuss before we go to school.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“Starting today, I’ll also be going to Seiun.”

Wait, there was only one place with that name around here!

Seiun High was the school I attended. It was a relatively well-known and prestigious private school within the Kanagawa Prefecture.

“Oh,” I responded. “I guess that means we’ll be going to the same school.”

“We should be in the same class, too. You’re also in advanced placement, right?”

“Seriously?” I blurted out.

Seiun only had one AP class. That meant we would be in the same room for our two remaining years.

“Looks like we’ll be seeing each other around the clock, huh?” I joked, trying to make light of the situation.

“Yep. And for that exact reason, I’d like to keep our relationship as siblings a secret.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Where’s your sense of imagination? Just think about it—even if we are siblings because of our parents’ marriage, we just met each other yesterday. If people found out about our living situation, it would make for perfect fap material for the boys!”

“PUH!” I made an odd choking sound as my mouthful of miso was promptly evacuated through my nose. Agh! It burns! It burns! “Girls shouldn’t be talking about things like fapping!” I cried out.

“It’s the truth. I’m not going to mince words,” she stated flatly. “Anyways, I don’t want to deal with those kinds of bad vibes on my first day at a new school.”

I couldn’t blame her for wanting to avoid the, well, “fap material” of our living situation. As a healthy, growing boy with the typical hyper-active libido of a teenager, I was well aware of what my peers were capable of. Shigure’s worries were perfectly justified.

“In other words, you want us to lie and act like complete strangers?” I asked.

“No, there’s no need to lie,” she explained. “It’s usually more trouble than it’s worth—people can sniff out the truth pretty easily, and it’s a hassle to get both of our stories straight. Just don’t go around gossiping about us, okay? I imagine our teachers will keep quiet about it if we ask them to. And thankfully, since our last name—Satou—is so common, no one will suspect a thing if we don’t draw attention to it.”

“Well, I don’t mind any of that,” I replied.

I had no reason to object. After all, I was just as reluctant as she

was to be the topic of our classmates' obscene conversations. Even if their discussions had no basis in reality, I really didn't want Haruka to overhear them. No, I had no reason to shoot down Shigure's proposal.

Wait, hold on a second there. That wasn't quite right. There were a few people I had to tell—Haruka, for starters, as well as a few of my guy friends who visited the apartment on a regular basis.

"I'll promise to keep our relationship on the down low, but there's one person in particular I need to discuss this with," I mentioned. "Also, a couple of my guy friends come over pretty frequently. Since they'd end up finding out sooner or later, I need to talk to them, as well. It goes without saying that I'll warn them to keep their mouths shut about it."

I purposefully hadn't mentioned Haruka's name. If Shigure found out that I had a girlfriend who was identical to her, I had no doubt that her malicious smile would quickly resurface. Like Shigure had suggested earlier, I wasn't exactly lying, but I wasn't rushing to let her know about Haruka, either.

"Can your friends keep a secret?" asked Shigure.

"Yeah. In that respect, they're way more trustworthy than me," I reassured her.

"If you say so. I won't stop you, but only if—as an apology—you give me a good morning kiss on the cheek," she replied, the devilish smile once again creeping across her face.

This girl won't give me a break!

"I told you to cut that out!" I yelled.

"Aha. What's with the red face? Kissing a family member on the cheek is just a run-of-the-mill greeting, right? It's a pretty normal thing to do overseas."

"So just because it's done overseas, it should be normal in Japan, too? That's some pretty stupid reasoning!"

"Big words for someone who doesn't have the balls to plant a smacker on my cheek. If you don't indulge your cute little sister with her selfish request, I won't give you permission to tell your friends about us. So what will you do, my spineless beta brother?"

"Don't underestimate me! I've planted dozens of 'smackers' on dozens of cheeks!" I boldly exclaimed.

Okay, that was as blatant a lie as any. Given how I'd practically creamed my pants just from holding a girl's hand, I'd obviously never kissed anyone on the cheek. Still, I'd become certain of one thing: now that Shigure had developed a taste for tormenting me, she wouldn't be stopping anytime soon.

One look at her face gave everything away. That teasing grin, which was brimming with malice and contempt, was pointed completely in my direction. No, she didn't actually want a good

morning kiss from me—she just enjoyed seeing me squirm under her bold demands.

This isn't good. I knew I needed to do something to nip this nasty little habit of hers in the bud. Otherwise, there would be a long chain of manipulation and humiliation in my future. I needed to show her that I wouldn't back down—even if I was cornered, I'd still come out swinging.

Feigning courage, I placed my hands on the table and leaned forward. As I approached Shigure, she turned her cheek toward me as if to say, "C'mon! Gimme a big, wet smooch!"

"Ergh," I mumbled as I faltered. How is her skin so flawless? Is she even human?

No, I couldn't hesitate! She mocked me because I freaked out and lost my nerve over every little thing. I needed to stop thinking and just bite the bullet. I psyched myself up and leaned closer, my trembling lips honing in on her cheek.

At that moment, the invigorating fragrance of shampoo tickled my nostrils, and I froze. That scent was identical to Haruka's.

Shit! You're telling me they don't just look the same; they also smell the same?!

With that realization, a bitter sense of guilt stabbed my chest. She might have been my stepsister, and it might have been on the cheek, but I was about to kiss a girl I'd literally just met! I hadn't even shared that experience with Haruka yet. Wouldn't that be a betrayal of her trust? If I followed through with this, would I be able to look my girlfriend in the eyes during our lunch break?

"Okay, stop right there!" Shigure cried.

"Ahwah?!" I blurted out, stopping in my tracks. Shigure took the opportunity to push me back.

"Oh, for God's sake! Why're you taking this so seriously?" she asked, looking somewhat abashed. "That was clearly a joke. Kiss the girl you like, not me."

"Y-You're the one who told me to do it," I retorted.

"And I never thought you actually would! You've got one hell of a dirty mind, Big Bro!"

"For the first time in my life, I'm getting the urge to hit a woman."

"Eek! Let's keep this a domestic-violence-free zone! It's true that I did take things too far, though—sorry about that," Shigure acknowledged with an apologetic bow of her head. "You're free to tell your friends about us. If you think it's necessary, go ahead. As long as you don't go around spilling the beans to everyone and their dog, we shouldn't have a problem."

And with that, she stood up and began clearing away her dishes

and utensils.

Where did all this kindness come from?

I was genuinely at a loss. Unlike me, she hadn't appeared embarrassed by what had taken place. The inner workings of the female heart were far too complicated for a guy like me.

Chapter Five

Reunion X Sisters

“I’m Shigure Satou, and I’m transferring here from Shueikan High in Fukuoka. I might be a little bit behind compared to everyone else, but I look forward to becoming friends with you guys.”

It was right before the start of homeroom. Shigure stood in front of the blackboard and introduced herself to the rest of the advanced placement class.

Incidentally, she still wore Shueikan’s uniform, only the school emblem had been changed to Seiun’s. Since I had bought the standard uniform without much thought, I hadn’t been aware of it, but Seiun—a private school—didn’t have very strict rules about clothing and accessories. So long as the color, emblem, and fabric coverage met a certain standard, we were relatively free to wear whatever we liked.

Apparently, Shigure had altered her old uniform to meet said standards in order to save some money. She’d mentioned yesterday that her previous home had also used an old balanced flue. Since she and her mother used to live alone, they probably hadn’t been very wealthy. I can imagine that’s where she’d picked up all of her incredible household skills and penny-pinching techniques from.

With introductions out of the way, the teacher quickly instructed her to sit next to me. This had nothing to do with the fact that we were stepsiblings—our seating order was done alphabetically. In fact, no one had even mentioned the idea that we might know each other. I wondered if Shigure had spoken to the teacher beforehand.

“Satou, you went to Shueikan? That’s amazing!”

“I can’t believe you decided to come here. Sure, Seiun’s got some cred in the area, but we’re basically soggy, off-brand corn flakes compared to Shueikan.”

“Right? Not even living alone would’ve stopped me from staying at Shueikan.”

During the break between first and second period, our classmates swarmed to Shigure like moths to a flame, barraging her with questions. Even so, no one indicated any suspicion about our relationship. I guess it was like she’d said the day before—Satou was an incredibly common name, so no one was any the wiser. Instead, Shigure’s former school became the main topic of conversation.

Even as a resident of Kanagawa, I knew about Shueikan High—a famous school in Kyushu. Compared to Seiun, a slightly brainy school in the area, Shueikan pretty much existed in a different dimension. Believe me when I say it was considered elite in every sense of the

word—I mean, that school was renowned on a national level.

Given this was an AP class, plenty of its students were conscious of academic backgrounds. As a result, they couldn't contain their curiosity about a school known on a country-wide basis. After a while—during the break after third period, to be precise—the conversation shifted from Shigure's former school to the girl herself. That was when things took a turn.

"Still, it feels like I've seen you around our school before, Shigure," one of my female classmates mentioned.

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. I wonder why."

"There's a girl in the drama club who looks a lot like her. Could that be it?" another ventured.

"Oh, right! The girl who played that small role in last year's cultural festival. Her acting might be way over the top, but she's still pretty cute. Well, that explains the *déjà vu*."

Oh, crap.

Shigure's physical resemblance to Haruka had finally cropped up in the discussion, and she quickly jumped on the topic with a curious gleam in her eyes.

"How interesting," she said. "I'd love to meet her. Do you know what class she's in?"

"Nah, I have no idea. Does anyone else know? Uh, no one at all?"

"Not many AP students join a club."

"And regular classes are in the new building. Outside of friends from middle school, we don't interact with them much. But talk about uncanny—the more I look at you, the more you two look like the exact same person..."

I overheard the exchange while practically on the edge of my seat.

At this rate, Haruka and Shigure would cross paths sooner rather than later. Seeing as Shigure had been the one to suggest hiding our connection as siblings, I highly doubted that she would let our little secret slip. Still, I couldn't be absolutely certain. I needed to explain the situation to my girlfriend, stat. I had no intention of hiding anything, but I couldn't let Haruka find out about our living situation without me around. If that happened, there was no chance in hell would I be able to smooth things over.

But I seriously needed to chill. We'd already agreed to meet up during lunch break, so I had no reason to panic. Calm down.

All that was left was coming up with a way to break the ice. As I started to rack my brain, a message arrived from Haruka.

"Something urgent came up, so I can't see you during lunch > < Sorry!"

Absolutely seething in the chat.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a panicked mess at this point, but there wasn't much I could do about it. Haruka wasn't the type to flake out on me at the last minute over something trivial—whatever was going on, it must've been really important.

With a heavy sigh, I sent her a stamp showing that I understood.

There was no point in worrying myself sick about it, so I shifted the gears in my brain. I'd talk to someone else first.

Fourth period ended, signaling the beginning of lunch break. Once the bell had rung, I shot up out of my seat, practically sprinting toward the furthest desk by the window, where my disgustingly-handsome friend Tomoe Wakabayashi sat. I needed to get there before the usual gaggle of girls formed a barrier around him, repelling losers like me.

"Tomoe, mind joining me for lunch?" I asked.

"Sounds good. Should I call Takeshi, too?"

"Yeah, that would be great."

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Tomoe Wakabayashi and Takeshi Takeda were both friends of mine from middle school.

Takeshi was a junior who attended regular classes, and he was also my former partner in the forever alone club. Standing at 175cm, his bulging muscles were visible even beneath his uniform. As the ace of the weightlifting club, he preferred chugging down protein shakes to having three square meals a day. According to the guy himself, he'd started working out to attract girls. Unfortunately, his innate geekiness had led to disaster. After becoming obsessed with weight training, he'd drastically deviated from his original goal, crossing the line from "shredded" into "The Holk's Japanese cousin." It should probably go without saying that girls actively avoided him.

Similar to me, Tomoe Wakabayashi was a junior in AP. He had the tall, slender build of a model, and was also incredibly thoughtful—he'd bleach his hair just enough to avoid getting on our nerves. He also had the best grades in our class. That, combined with his immaculate features, refined style, and thoughtful diligence, made him irresistible to women. You could drop him off in the middle of some podunk nowhere, and girls would still find a way to flock to him in 10 minutes flat, like moths to a ridiculously handsome flame.

I might have felt jealous of Aizawa, our class's braggadocious player, but I had nothing but respect for Tomoe. After all, he never distinguished between men and women, between the popular crowd

and losers; he seemed to have fun with everyone. Plus, he strove to make the time he spent with others enjoyable. I could never emulate the sincere, selfless way he acted with absolutely everyone. If a guy like him wasn't adored, there would be some sort of problem with the world itself. For that reason, I couldn't bring myself to be envious of the guy.

Though I did have other friends, I spent most of my time with these two. Back in middle school—and, hell, even now—they would frequently crash at my place, and we'd take advantage of my dad being away for work to stay up until the crack of dawn.

Due to how close we were, they would find out about Shigure eventually. That's why I'd invited them to lunch. We chose a secluded spot outside, next to the cafeteria, and I promptly spilled my guts about everything that had occurred since I'd arrived home yesterday.

"That's rough, buddy," Tomoe responded after hearing the whole story. He looked up at the clear blue sky—a reminder of summer's imminent approach—and continued, "Hiro, what the hell did you do in your past life?"

"That's what I'd like to know," I lamented. "As the real victim of this whole mess, all I can do is curse my ancestors. I do plan on settling things one way or another, though. Hey, at least there's a silver lining—they may look identical, but their personalities are worlds apart. Since they're so different, I'm sure I'll end up forgetting about everything else sooner or later."

"Unlike Haruka, there's definitely more to her than meets the eye," Tomoe noted.

"You've barely interacted with her, and you can already tell?"

"Being hounded by all those questions must have been exhausting, but from her expression, you'd think she was having the time of her life. Not only was she super friendly, but she also had perfect control of her face. That's someone you have to watch out for."

Tomoe was a great judge of character. Unlike me, he hadn't fallen for her act.

"Shigure wants to keep our sibling relationship a secret while she gets used to her new environment," I explained. "But since you guys are always coming over to my place, I couldn't exactly keep the cat in the bag for long. That's why I called you here today—I'd appreciate it if you guys could keep this under wraps."

"No worries, I understand the situation. If this got out, the dudes around here would definitely start using it as fap material."

"D-Do you have to use that phrase?"

"How else do you want me to say it? Something to add to the spank bank? Material to beat their meat to? Oh, speaking of meat—your side dishes look delicious!"

“Stop turning everything into a dick joke!” I protested, quickly stuffing a piece of fried meat into his mouth to shut him up.

“You’re just really bad with dirty jokes,” he laughed, still savoring the meaty morsel. His expression quickly grew serious, though. “By the way, do you plan on telling Haruka about this?”

Honestly, not many people had actually realized we were dating yet. It’s not like we were hiding it or anything, but due to our slow progress, no one had picked up on it yet. I mean, we’d just held hands for the first time yesterday. These two were an exception, though. I often turned to them for help, and they lent an ear when I gushed about Haruka and offered advice when I expressed my worries. It was precisely because he knew about our relationship that Tomoe was worried about me.

“Well,” I said, preparing to give the answer I’d thought up last night, “I’d feel horrible if I kept quiet about it. Couples shouldn’t hide things from each other, after all.”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t tell her,” Tomoe jumped in, quickly and sternly rejecting my idea.

“Wh-Why? I mean, she won’t exactly be jumping for joy at the idea that I live with her spitting image, but wouldn’t keeping it a secret be even worse? Plus, I’m not exactly doing anything worth feeling guilty about, so there’s no reason to hide the truth.”

“The only person who’d feel better about explaining everything would be you, though, Hiro,” he replied simply.

Huh?

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“Haruka’s a great girl. I’m sure if you talk to her about it, she’ll understand that you’re not in the wrong here. But enduring something and not worrying about it are two entirely different things. Just think about it—her doppelganger is living with her boyfriend while she’s home alone. She won’t be able to handle that.”

“But we’re siblings through our parents’ marriage. I wouldn’t do anything to my little—”

“She’s only been your little sister since yesterday. Do you seriously expect Haruka to say, ‘Oh, you won’t do anything with her? Whew, that’s a relief!’ Plus, I imagine you got pretty worked up during your first night together. You can’t expect me to believe otherwise.”

“You’re not wrong, but—”

“You and Haruka only just held hands yesterday. A romance that’s built on nothing but pain won’t last.”

“Hrm...”

I reflected on Tomoe’s words and realized he was at least partially right—I had been too fixated on proving my innocence, and I hadn’t considered Haruka’s feelings at all. If I told my girlfriend about

Shigure, I would be freed from the guilt of hiding something. But once she knew the truth, how would Haruka feel?

Of course, I had no intention of confusing the two girls, and even if I did, those emotions would be directed toward Haruka through Shigure—the opposite would never happen. Still, regardless of my intentions, Haruka's feelings were a different matter. Would she be able to simply believe my words without harboring the slightest bit of unease? No, our relationship probably wasn't strong enough for that yet.

"Well, if you can't bring yourself to lie, I won't force you to," Tomoe followed up. "But at this stage, I think that the truth would be too devastating. I mean, even when a patient needs surgery, you still need to observe their condition first before you come to a decision. Going under the knife requires perfect timing. Everything has a time and place, you catch my drift?"

"Yeah, you're probably right about that..."

From Haruka's perspective, ignorance would be bliss. But if we looked at it realistically, it would be tricky to keep it a secret for too long. We were a couple—the most intimate of relationships—so it would be inevitable that she'd find out eventually.

"What do you think I should do, Tomoe?" I asked.

"For now, it's imperative that you explain the situation to Shigure. Have her avoid you at school. In the meantime, you should develop your relationship with Haruka and start slowly opening up to her. That's all you can do, really."

"Develop our relationship? Until what point?"

"At the very least, until you've had sex."

"At the very least?! " I sputtered.

"Even if you get that far, your situation is still dangerous as hell. I know one thing's for sure, though: no matter what, you need to keep a lid on this until your dad returns in a year. The fact that you're living alone together makes things pretty rough as-is. It's a 'one strike, you're out' kinda deal."

Yeah, he was right. Even if I casted the idea of having s-s-se... se... ahem. Even if I casted the idea of having coitus aside for the time being, I had to wait until my dad came home. Living on our own together versus living with our parents gave off an entirely different impression. I nodded to show I got his point.

My other friend, Takeshi, had been staring at me concernedly for a good while, so I turned to him and asked for his opinion.

"What do you think, Takeshi?"

"May I speak my honest opinion?"

Damn, that's quite the intense expression. I could feel his sincere, heartfelt concern for me. Man, I had some truly great friends.

"Please," I said. "Tell me whatever you're thinking."

"Understood. Hiromichi, I believe that what you lack... is none other than testosterone!"

Pardon?

"Testosterone is the male hormone that increases muscle mass and gives one a masculine physique," Takeshi explained with flourish. "Furthermore, testosterone is the source of will-power and decision-making skills, affecting both the mind and body. Thus, low testosterone will cause a man's self-confidence to dwindle! That is the true culprit behind your indecisiveness! 'But what is the solution?' you may ask. You must exercise until you collapse! Increasing muscle mass will serve to increase your testosterone! Muscles are the solution to everything in this world! Now, cast aside your worries, and raise the barbell, young Johnny!"

Yep. Asking Takeshi for dating advice was a mistake, as always.

"But Hiro, those two do look eerily similar, don't they?" Tomoe asked.

"Yeah, they do. I'm still shocked by that," I replied.

"Dude, you're taking this way too lightly. At first, I just thought, 'Wow, some people really do look alike.' But when I observed Shigure more closely, I realized she's pretty much identical to Haruka—right down to the smallest details. This goes way beyond mistaking one person for another. Could the two of them be—"

Just as Tomoe was about to hesitantly broach the topic, someone else cut him off.

"Oh, Hiromichi!" a girl called out, appearing in front of our table.

"Sh-Shigure?!"

"Why are you so surprised?" she asked. "We sit next to each other, don't we? And you must be Wakabayashi from our class, right?"

"You catch on quick," Tomoe noted. "I don't remember introducing myself."

"Well, you're pretty famous around here. All the girls in our class were bragging about you. They kept gushing things like, 'I doubt there are any boys as handsome as him at Shueikan.' But this is my first time seeing the bodybuilder. Mind if I ask your name?"

"Y-You would like to know my name?!" Takeshi cried, leaping out of his seat. Due to an excess of his beloved "male hormone," he was even more, uh, enthusiastic around women than I was.

"I am Takeshi Takeda—a junior in regular classes! I-It is a pleasure to meet you!"

"I'm Shigure Satou. I just transferred into the junior AP class. It's a pleasure to meet you, too," Shigure replied with a pleasant smile, feigning innocence all the while.

"Hnnng!" Takeshi huffed and puffed through his nose, as if he

were a manic bull. Then he turned to our friend and whispered in his ear. “T-Tomoe, this young lady asked for my name. C-Could this mean that she f-fancies me?”

“Could you be any more shameless, you gigantic wad of protein?” Tomoe replied in an exasperated tone.

“Oh, you’re in the middle of lunch,” Shigure said. “Sorry for interrupting.”

“No worries,” Tomoe assured her, pointing at the remaining seat of the four-person table. “Are you having lunch, Shigure? Feel free to sit with us if you’d like.”

I figured he was trying to create an opportunity so we could ask for Shigure’s cooperation. Unfortunately, she shook her head at the invention.

“No thanks,” she replied. “I’m actually looking for someone right now. Speaking of which... Takeda, you’re a junior in the regular class, right? Do you know a girl named Haruka Saikawa?”

“Shigure!”

At that moment, someone loudly called out to her. It was a voice I knew all too well—after all, it belonged to the person I adored.

Don’t tell me...

I wanted to reject the idea instinctively, but it turned out that my assumption had been correct. I turned toward the voice to find my girlfriend—Haruka Saikawa—heaving and covered in sweat.

“Sh-Shigure,” she gasped between heavy breaths. “Is that really you, Shigure?!”

“Big Sis...”

“Shigure! Aaah! Waaaah!” Haruka cried, running over and squeezing the other girl hard enough that I was genuinely worried her head would pop off.

I froze in place, staring at my girlfriend’s bawling figure. To say I was confused would be an understatement—I mean, how did they know each other? But, more importantly, what had Shigure just called Haruka?

She said, “Big Sis.” Those words definitely left her mouth, right?!

“Sorry about that,” Shigure apologized, glancing at me. “You can probably tell just by looking at us, but Big Si—I mean, Haruka and I are twin sisters. We were split up when our parents divorced.”

X X X

“I’m sorry,” Haruka sobbed. “As soon as I saw your face, I lost it.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to apologize about that,” Shigure replied. “Still, talk about a major shock. When I heard there was a

student who looked just like me, I considered the possibility and went looking for you. Turns out it really was you, Big Sis.”

“I heard about that, too—that there was a transfer student who looked just like me. I thought you might’ve come back home, so I searched everywhere for you. And now I’ve found you, Shigure. There’s so much we need to talk about... b-but whenever I look at your face, I feel so overwhelmed, a-and...” Haruka trailed off and burst into tears again.

“There’s no need for the waterworks,” Shigure scolded her affectionately. “Even after all these years, you’re still such a crybaby, Big Sis.”

“Shigure... I’m glad you’re doing well,” Haruka sniffled.

“Yeah, I feel the same.”

The two sisters exchanged an intimate embrace. They had been torn apart at a tender age because of their parents’ divorce, and they had finally been reunited after years apart due to circumstances that could only be called miraculous. Truly, it was a beautiful sight to behold—no words could have done it justice.

Yeah, and maybe I could actually enjoy it if I wasn’t actively shitting my pants!

“Well then,” Tomoe spoke up. “I don’t want to intrude on a family reunion, so I’ll be leaving. Let’s head out, Takeshi. I’ll see you later, Hiro. Keep your chin up.”

“Wait!” I pleaded to him in a whisper. “Whatever you do, don’t abandon me here. As the ridiculously good-looking side character, you exist to advise me—the shit-out-of-luck protagonist. Now, slap that trademark smug grin on your face, and tell me what the hell I need to do! Yesterday, I wound up with a little stepsister who looks just like my girlfriend! But my girlfriend is also my stepsister’s older sibling! As the brother-slash-boyfriend in this situation, what in God’s name am I supposed to do about this?!”

“No clue. Ridiculously good-looking side characters can only do so much. As the protagonist, you need to find the balls to figure this one out on your own. Don’t drag me into the blood-soaked trenches of your messed up family tree,” he whispered back.

“Stop screwing around, and do your job! Hey, Takeshi, say something!”

“Hmm,” Takeshi mused quietly. “Those two young ladies look very similar. I wonder—could they possibly be twins?”

“Do you only have one brain cell?!” I yelled.

“Oh!” Haruka blurted out, finally aware of my presence. “I-Is that you, Hiromichi?”

“H-Hey there,” I stammered.

“D-Don’t look at me,” Haruka responded between cries. “I don’t

want you to see me making such an ugly face.”

She hid behind Shigure, her tear-stained face turning bright red. It was clear she was embarrassed by her reaction to the whole ordeal.

Aw, she’s so goddamn cute. Now, can someone book me a flight to Mars?

“Big Sis, do you know Hiromichi?” asked Shigure.

“Y-Yeah, I know him. In fact, we’re lovers,” she confessed.

“LUBBERS?”

An astonishing sound—like that of a chicken being strangled—had escaped Shigure’s mouth.

“How do you know Hiromichi, Shigure?” Haruka asked.

At the bottom of the ninth, Haruka pitched a decisive, lethal question.

If I see Shigure with that malicious smile on her face again, I’ll—

“Hiromichi and I are both in AP class together,” Shigure explained.

“Oh, you’re in AP, as well?” Haruka asked. “That’s amazing. You’ve always been such a brainiac.”

Huh? Did Shigure just lie? I’m not hearing things, am I?

“Sorry, but the two of us have a lot to talk about,” Shigure told me. “If you don’t mind, I’ll be borrowing my sister for now.”

“Hiromichi, I’m sorry about standing you up today,” Haruka added. “You’re being so nice about this.”

“No, it’s... it’s all good,” I stammered. “The circumstances are what they are.”

“Thanks. I’ll definitely make this up to you,” she promised.

The two girls waved goodbye and entered the cafeteria. As soon as they’d left, the tension drained from my body, causing me to slump down into my chair.

“That went better than expected...” I mumbled.

“True, but she was the one who figured the situation out and worked with you,” Tomoe responded. “She’s a smart gal, and she’s not as terrible as you made her out to be. She can clearly tell what lines should never be crossed.”

“Yeah...” I gave a half-hearted reply.

“If she’s that perceptive, she’ll know it’s best to distance herself from you. I mean, it shouldn’t be too hard to hide the truth for a while once you guys are on the same page, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I guess...”

It was true—Shigure had saved my sorry ass. Since she’d already gotten so much teasing in during the span of the two days I’d known her, I figured she’d torment me into oblivion if she found out about Haruka. On the contrary, she treated others much better than I’d imagined.

Well, that's a huge freaking relief.

Despite the massive weight off my shoulders, I still felt a murky unease pressing on my chest. Being honest about everything wasn't true selflessness—sometimes, it was nothing more than self-satisfaction. I'd come to understand Tomoe's position quite well.

That being said, was lying to Haruka and making Shigure do the same really the right thing to do? As a brother and boyfriend, could I be proud of myself? Being so dishonest with both of them had given rise to an ill-defined sense of discomfort. Or was keeping this secret proof of my worth as a man? Honestly, I had no idea.

Chapter Six

Domestic X Nipping

Shigure found me once school was over and whispered into my ear that she would be grabbing tea with Haruka. I didn't know exactly how long they'd been apart, but when I'd met Haruka at daycare in the fourth grade, she had already been on her own. If her sister had been around, they would have been placed in the same program. In that case, they'd been separated for at least seven years. After they'd spent so much time in different homes, taking a day or two to catch up wouldn't cut it.

"I'll be home by dinner," Shigure added.

"Sounds good," I replied.

It also meant that I got to walk home with the guys for the first time in a while.

Once I returned home, I washed my face and immediately hit the books. Sure, this might have been my routine, but it also provided a welcome distraction. I was struggling to process my emotions, and I couldn't bear the immense pressure that had been steadily mounting in my chest since lunchtime. As a boyfriend and older brother, was I doing the right thing?

"For better or for worse, this is all I can do right now..." I grumbled to myself.

Tomoe had been right—if I told Haruka the untarnished truth right now, it would only serve to make me feel better. Forcing the burden onto my girlfriend would only be taking advantage of her kindness. If I truly valued Haruka, I needed to shoulder the guilt of this whole mess alone. And as for getting Shigure to lie, well, hadn't it been her suggestion to keep our parents' marriage a secret in the first place? I wasn't the one forcing her to be dishonest, right?

"Sure, whatever makes you feel better..."

No matter how I interpreted the situation, the pressure in my chest never abated. Trying to focus on my notebooks did nothing to help me escape the creeping sense of revulsion. Eventually, I lost the will to even sit at my desk. Studying had never failed me like this before.

I stared blankly up at the ceiling, which was dyed a brilliant shade of crimson from the setting sun. The view, combined with my inner turmoil, made me feel detached from reality.

Since Shigure would probably come home late, I briefly contemplated making dinner. I quickly abandoned the idea, however—she'd volunteered to take care of the cooking just this morning. I

didn't want to make her feel guilty. Maybe I should have just minded my own business. Hell, even I found my actions ridiculous, but what did it matter?

And as such inane thoughts swirled in my head, the sun set, and Shigure returned.

"I'm back!" she announced.

"That was fast. I thought that you might have dinner with Haruka."

"We made a promise, didn't we? I'll be doing the cooking around here."

"I could've managed at least one dinner alone."

"And then you would've felt bad about going back on your word, right?"

Damn. In less than a day, Shigure had managed to totally figure me out. Either she was basically the next Sherlock Holmes, or I lacked any depth whatsoever. I'd be devastated if it was the latter, to be honest.

"Just give me a little bit. I'm going to start making dinner right now," Shigure told me. "Since we already have leftover miso soup, I'll only need to take care of the entrée."

After washing her hands, Shigure removed a bowl covered in plastic wrap from the fridge. Inside was pork marinated in ginger soy sauce. She had probably taken care of all the food prep this morning. I hadn't even noticed the damn thing in the fridge, so what right did I have to set foot into the kitchen? Yeah, it would be for the best if I left dinner to Shigure.

Consequently, I found myself with nothing to do. If it were just me living here, I would have been content with idling away the time. But with another person hard at work in the vicinity, I felt an uncomfortable itch at the idea of sitting on my hands. Suddenly, I found myself speaking to Shigure about the day's events.

"So Haruka's your twin sister," I mentioned. "No wonder you look so alike."

"Yeah, our parents divorced around the time we started elementary school. At that age, we had no clue what was going on, but ended up living in separate houses. We hadn't seen each other even once since then."

That would mean their reunion had been 10 years in the making. Who could blame Haruka for bursting into tears like that?

"Does that mean you lived around here in the past?" I asked.

"I did. I was really eager to see Haruka again once I came back to this town, so I sped up our plans by a year, and now here I am."

"Oh, is that what happened?"

"Yep. My mom actually wanted to bring me along to America.

With my grades, I wouldn't have struggled in a study abroad program. But since I wanted to see Haruka so badly, I fought against my mom's objections and moved here a year early. It wasn't easy—we got into a massive argument, and I said some things that really weren't fair to her. I ended up blaming my mom for our separation,” she replied, lowering her voice the further she delved into her explanation. She probably regretted speaking to her mom that way. Despite that, she'd wanted to reunite with Haruka badly enough to resort to that level of ruthlessness.

“Were you able to discuss everything you wanted with her?” I asked.

“Pretty much. We talked about our dad, our lives after the separation, Haruka, and a lot of other things.”

“Sounds like you two had a good time.”

“But actually, the main thing she wanted to discuss was you,” she noted.

“M-Me?!” I yelped.

“Yep. She wouldn't stop gushing about you. Honestly, it was nauseatingly saccharine—I think it gave me heartburn.”

Haruka was gushing about me?! Enough to give someone heartburn?! Damn it, I've got to find out what she said!

“Incidentally, wh-what exactly did Haruka say?” I asked.

“I can't tell you that. It's a secret between us girls.”

“Ugh. What if I slip you five hundred yen?”

“Aha. You'll just have to look forward to hearing the juicy details from Haruka herself.”

Shit, that was a bust.

“Still, imagine my surprise when I found out about your relationship,” she continued. “You've gotten yourself into a pretty unforgiving character route, huh? Well, at least one thing finally makes sense.”

“What's that?”

“When we first met, you kept looking at me strangely. It wasn't like you were captivated by my beauty, ready to pounce on anything that moved like some sexually-repressed ape. You also weren't feigning indifference, trying too hard to act cool. You just looked kind of distraught.”

“You could tell?”

“To some extent. Honestly, it was pretty rude—I mean, how many high school boys are blessed enough to live with a total catch like me?”

“Wow, way to be modest,” I grumbled.

“This morning's kiss was supposed to be a huge favor, but you scrunched up your face at the prospect like it was some sort of torture

technique. It was really hurtful.”

So that’s why she put a stop to things.

“Well, now that I know the reason, I’m not offended anymore,” Shigure continued. “Who wouldn’t have trouble dealing with a little sister who looked exactly like their girlfriend? You should have explained everything sooner.”

“I thought that if you knew, you’d torment me into oblivion.”

“Rude! Just who do you think I am? Even I know when to draw the line.”

I found myself agreeing with her. I’d come to realize that she wasn’t actually that bad of a person. She would never do something to truly upset someone. It was just like she said when we had first met—she was just like a kitten playing with your feet.

“I get what’s going on now,” Shigure said. “Seeing as you’re going out with my sister, my actions earlier were wrong. I’m sorry for bothering you—it won’t happen again.”

I was living with my girlfriend’s long-lost twin sister. Just the slightest touch could cause this bomb to detonate. What’s more, Shigure had just indicated that she was well aware of the danger.

“Watching you freak out was fun,” she admitted, “but... since you mean so much to my sister, I shouldn’t tempt you into being unfaithful. I don’t want to hurt Haruka in any way. It goes without saying at school, but we should also put some distance between us here.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“We should try to interact with each other as little as possible. Of course, I’ll do my best to help hide the fact that we’re living together. At the very least, we should keep this a secret until our parents come back in a year. It should be a breeze if we work together.”

Shigure smiled at me. It wasn’t the typical, malicious grin she usually teased me with—no, this expression came across as kind and somewhat lonely.

“I’ve always wanted an older sibling,” she added feebly.

Ah, I see. Now I understand.



I only had one option: to conceal the truth from Haruka. Despite that knowledge, I still hadn't been able to wrap my head around why the pressure in my chest still remained. It was obvious—I felt pathetic. Pathetic because my relationship with Haruka had been built upon such a weak and shaky foundation, one in which I couldn't be truthful with her. Without a doubt, honesty always trumped lying. If Haruka and I had formed a bond that not even Shigure's presence could sever, this problem wouldn't have existed in the first place.

And yet, I hadn't been able to choose the best option. My inadequacy had led to our current predicament. What's worse, I had to rely on my younger sister. I hid behind her instead of fixing my own flaws. I was the reason for the concerned look on Shigure's face. It was an expression that didn't suit her at all. Seeing that, could I be proud of myself as a brother? As a boyfriend?

No, I'm not proud of myself at all.

I stood up and walked over to my younger sister's side. "Shigure, I'm not nearly as pathetic as you might think," I declared.

"Huh?"

"This should go without saying, but I'm grateful that you kept our secret from Haruka. I don't recall asking you to do anything else, though. You think I'd betray my girlfriend so easily? Seriously—if your head got any bigger, your neck might snap. I don't know what kind of evil schemes you're cooking up, but my feelings for her will never change. No matter how much you tease me or try to tempt me like this morning, I won't give in. Haruka is my one-and-only girlfriend, and you're my one-and-only little sister."

"Ah!" she gasped.

"Stop worrying about me so much. You can act as spoiled as you like—I can handle it. After all, I'm your older brother now."

I probably just dug my own grave... and a deep one at that.

Still, I had no regrets. Sure, I was probably both an incompetent boyfriend and brother, but it wasn't like I had much experience in either field. Hopefully, they'd cut me some slack for being somewhat inadequate.

I knew I couldn't just use my inexperience as an excuse to hide behind the two girls in my life, thinking I had no other option, though. Little by little, I would overcome my deficiencies through sheer willpower, all in the hopes that I could tell Haruka the truth as quickly as possible.

As I mulled everything over, my realization finally alleviated the stubborn pressure that resided in my chest.

"Hehe. Haha. Ahahaha!" Shigure suddenly burst out into laughter, the malicious grin I'd come to recognize returning to her face.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"I mean, you freaked out so much over seeing me in a bath towel, you didn't even notice the string on my camisole. You're acting pretty cool for some bottom-feeding soy boy who gets sweaty palms around the opposite sex."

Urgh.

"That was a surprise attack!" I yelled in protest. "Now that I know what you're really like, I won't fall for the same trick twice!"

"Aha! I'm not so sure about that. But still..." she trailed off, wrapped her arms around my back in a tight embrace, and buried her face in my chest. "Just now, I could kind of understand why Haruka fell for you."

"Ah?! Shigure?!" I yelped.

"Despite being completely and utterly out of your depth, you're still trying your hardest for me. I admire that part of you. Maybe I should get in on the action, too."

"Wh-What?!"

"We're twins, after all," she murmured softly. "Seeing as you like Haruka, I'm sure you could end up falling for me, too. I'm already pretty crazy for you as-is. So how about it, Big Bro? Would you consider having me as your side chick?"

Wh-What the hell is this girl saying?!

"Just kidding!" she exclaimed. "You thought I was being serious?"

"Blurgh!"

"Ahaha, you're bright red!" Shigure giggled into my chest. "You're making this way too easy, honestly. I mean, you lose your cool so fast. How're you ever going to make any progress acting like that?"

Shit! And I fully expected her to pull this shit again and everything!

No amount of mental fortitude had prepared me for the sweet nothings she had whispered into my chest, and I hadn't been able to stop myself—or my beet-red face—from burning up.

"Are you really okay with giving me permission to do whatever I like?" Shigure asked with an impish grin. "You might find this surprising, but I'm actually quite the bully."

"That's not surprising at all. You look like you're having the time of your friggin' life," I grumbled.

"Well, no take backs," she replied. With a provocative smile, she wound her fingers around my necktie and pulled me in close enough to feel her breath. I had never been this close to Haruka, let alone any other girl. Though I couldn't stop my heart from practically bursting out of my chest, I did my best to feign composure.

“As a man, I won’t go back on my word,” I declared. “No matter how much my bratty little sister pushes my buttons, I’ll gladly accept her with open arms. Before long, you’ll be seeing monuments built to honor my greatness as an older brother.”

As if satisfied, Shigure pulled away from me. “Either way, we’ll still have to show restraint at school. We’re keeping our sibling relationship a secret, and I don’t want to hurt Haruka. But in this apartment, you’re my older brother, and no one else’s. You said something about pushing your buttons? Well, I’m gonna push each and every one of them. I’m hoping you can still find it within yourself to spoil me—your adorable little sister—absolutely rotten!”

She placed a finger in her mouth, pulling back the corner to reveal a single sparkling white canine tooth. “Can you handle these fangs?” her gesture seemed to say.

Yeah, I probably should have kept my mouth shut...

That much was obvious. But no matter what she was planning to throw my way, I was more than up to the challenge.

“Oh crap!” I exclaimed. “I forgot to buy a curtain!”

Chapter Seven

Afternoon X Bubbles

A few days had passed since I'd wound up with a little sister who was the spitting image of my girlfriend.

Thanks to her incredible communication skills, Shigure had fit into AP class in no time at all. Even from a distance, I could perceive her impressive skill at making and maintaining relationships. Whenever we had breaks, she consistently found a group to hang out with. At the same time, she never made herself the center of attention. She excelled at remaining neutral and balanced, aiming to avoid both excess affection and any animosity.

Just as Tomoe had suggested, she analyzed and conquered her surroundings with precision and ease. It must have been related to her skills in martial arts. Regardless, that had been Shigure's secret to surviving in this world, and she was admittedly quite impressive at it.

Back at home, our relationship as siblings was progressing rather well. "Hiromichi," you might say, "you had zero experience interacting with women before you started dating Haruka. How can you now deal with having an impish little sister who looks exactly like your girlfriend?" Well, let's just say it hadn't been smooth sailing. Fortunately, humans could adapt to almost anything that was forced on them. It was thanks to my tentative plan—or rather, my resolve to welcome Shigure with open arms—that I was able to do so.

Although the awkwardness had disappeared from our normal interactions, I still hadn't gotten used to anything that drew attention to Shigure's feminine side. It was precisely because she looked so much like my girlfriend that things became incredibly dicey whenever those instances cropped up. Despite my better judgment, I occasionally confused the two, and—as a result—I was constantly nagging at Shigure to stop acting in certain ways.

"Oh, so now I'm not allowed to act as spoiled as I like?" she would ask, disregarding me.

Waving around the "get of the jail free card" I'd so foolishly given her, she acted with total indifference to my plight. Whenever that happened, I would curse my own thoughtlessness. Yet each time I caught a glimpse of her gleeful expression, a stupid little voice inside my head would assure me that everything was fine.

Who would have pegged me for such a kind older brother? Not anyone I knew, that's for sure.

During our first weekend together, Shigure and I took the afternoon to visit the electronics store. Since our apartment only had a

regular microwave, she'd been dying to buy a convection one.

After we had arranged for the delivery, we walked to the supermarket and bought a mountain of ingredients.

"God, this is heavy," Shigure whined. "What kind of demon makes their little sister carry all these groceries? Help me out here!"

"I'm carrying the water, meat, fish, and rice. You can at least handle the vegetables," I pointed out.

"C'mon—at least take this squash off my hands!"

"Hey, don't unload the heaviest thing on me! Plus, my other hand is completely full because someone decided they needed four bottles of soda since they were on sale."

"Big Brooo..." she sobbed feebly.

I ignored her crocodile tears and courageously scaled the apartment building's steel-framed staircase. The metal plates, which looked as tattered and hole-ridden as ever, creaked more than usual.

This isn't going to fall out from under my feet, right...?

I managed to scale the last few steps with some trepidation and finally arrived at our apartment.

"We're home," I said. It's something I'd started saying recently, regardless of whether someone was already home or not—like right now. Obviously, it wasn't a habit I'd practiced when I lived alone. For some reason I couldn't quite place, I felt moved.

"Yeah, we're home. And I'm exhausted," Shigure whined.

I left my little sister in a grumpy, collapsed heap by the entryway and headed for the kitchen.

"Well, guess we should start by putting away all the raw food into the fridge," I declared, placing the mountain of groceries down.

"Stop right there, Big Bro! What the hell are you trying to pull?!"

In the blink of an eye, Shigure had leapt to her feet and dashed over to me.

"Huh?" I blurted out. "I'm just dealing with the groceries."

"The first thing you do when you get home is wash your hands! Even five-year-olds know that!" she scolded.

"Oh, that's what you're so worked up about? Talk about sweating the small stuff."

"The hell did you just say to me, dumbass?" she barked.

Whoa, who's she calling 'dumbass'?! Hello, 911? I sense murder in that tone!

"Then I have to ask," Shigure said. "At any point while we were out today, did you happen to fix your junk?"

"My 'junk'?! I've told you, girls shouldn't be saying that kind of stuff!"

"I'm not kidding right now. Did your hands go anywhere near your pants?"

“O-Of course not!” I stammered, overwhelmed by Shigure’s serious tone and expression.

“Really? You didn’t unconsciously fiddle around with your twig and berries? I mean, it’s pretty hot for the end of May, and you’re wearing denim jeans. Weren’t you feeling just the slightest bit stuffy under those? Perhaps it got so unbearable, you unthinkingly pushed little Hiromichi to the side while I wasn’t looking. Can you say with absolute certainty that nothing of the sort ever happened?”

“Er, well...” I floundered, since I couldn’t say for sure. As far as I could remember, I was innocent, but there was a chance I had unconsciously repositioned “little Hiromichi”—for men, that wasn’t much different from breathing.

“Suppose you fiddled around down there even once,” she continued. “If you then touched the fridge handle, you would’ve committed a grave act of bio terrorism. As the protector of this kitchen, I must bring down the hammer of justice on your crimes against humanity. So with all that said, I’ll repeat myself—can you swear on your grandfather’s grave that you didn’t rearrange your ding-a-ling at all? Cross your heart, hope to die, stick a needle in your eye?”

“Stick a needle in my eye”? God, she’s not being literal about that, is she?

“Okay! I got it already! I’ll go wash my hands!” I yelped, quickly fleeing from the terror that was my little sister.

I stood at the sink, letting the water run over my hands.

“If only you had done that from the start,” Shigure muttered with a sigh. “Make sure to scrub under your nails, too.”

“Are you my mom?” I asked.

“Would you like me to tuck you in with a warm glass of milk?”

“You’ve crossed into grandma territory there,” I joked while lathering my hands with the foamy soap.

“Hi-yah!” Shigure shouted, nudging me to the side with her hip. “Scoot over. This sink is really small.”

“Okay, okay.”

Considering our apartment didn’t even have a changing room, luxuries such as a bathroom sink weren’t exactly afforded to us. We did everything—from washing our hands to brushing our teeth—in the kitchen.

I quickly moved out of the way, allowing Shigure to fill the empty space. She ran the water over her hands, then pressed down on the soap bottle’s pump a few times.

“Huh?” she blurted, tilting her head in confusion. She swatted the pump a few more times for good measure, but was only rewarded by a small trickle of soap.

"None left?" I asked.

"Yep, looks like we've run out. Do we have any refills?"

"Uh, I don't think so. We used them all up recently."

"Talk about embarrassing—how could I, of all people, have allowed this oversight?"

"So much for the 'protector of the kitchen,' am I right?"

"Touché. I guess that means I'll just have to borrow some from you."

"Borrow some? What do you meEEAAAN?!"

My innocent question had quickly turned into a pathetic squeal as Shigure grabbed my hand mid-sentence. Hey, it's true that she was my little sister, but she was still a girl in the end!

"Wh-What are you doing?!" I cried.

"Isn't it obvious? Since you used the last of the soap, we have no choice but to wash our hands together."

"That's just gonna make our hands dirtier, isn't it?!"

"Not at all. Look, we're killing every microbe of bacteria as we speak. Oh, wait—are you getting all flustered from holding my hand? How naughty of you. Aren't you going out with my wonderful sister?"

The corners of Shigure's mouth loosened into a smile, revealing that malicious grin once again, which always seemed to say, "You're impossible not to tease." At the same time, she looked overjoyed to see me embarrassed.

You wanna play that game, huh?

"I said this before, right?" I asked. "You're not even on my radar. Use my hand however you like."

"Oh, really now? Then don't mind if I do."

"Gah!"

Her pale, slippery hand began to caress mine. The stimulus sent shivers down my spine, but so what? Compared to how I'd felt when holding Haruka's hand, this was nothing! Seriously.

"Oh my," Shigure said. "You seem quite composed."

"You've belittled me for long enough. For any man in a loving relationship, this level of contact is child's play. Just so you know, I held hands with Haruka over a week ago!"

"Only a week ago? That's, uh, quite something... Still, I'll admit I'm a touch disappointed. I was hoping to see you act a little more flustered."

Heh. I've got this one in the bag.

Shigure's constant mocking and mind games had finally started to grate on me. I needed to win a few rounds.

"But when I look at you in this light, you really are a man," she noted.

"What do you mean?"

“Look—when we line up our hands, yours are clearly thicker and larger than mine.”

“Yeah, that’s just common se—”

“Hi-yah!”

“Eep!”

Shigure took advantage of my slip in concentration to unleash a swift assault. While our hands were pressed together to compare sizes, she’d slipped her fingers between mine and squeezed tightly. Her fingers, slick with soap, wriggled around and tickled the ultra-sensitive webbing of my hand. Unable to bear that squirming sensation, I ended up letting out another squeal.

“That wasn’t a very manly yell,” Shigure laughed. “You sounded so adorable... and a little erotic.”

“Gah!”

My pathetic response caused Shigure to grow even cockier, if such a thing were possible. Her pale fingers slithered and coiled around mine like a snake, the sudsy bubbles slipping and squeaking with each movement. The bubbles inflated as her fingers danced around my hands until they burst. A slippery, suggestive sound echoed throughout the crimson, sunset-lit room.

“Looks like I’ve ruffled your feathers a bit,” Shigure giggled. “Now that you’ve experienced this level of pleasure, you’ll never be able to forget it. I bet every time your fingers entwine with your beloved girlfriend, you’ll remember the sensation you felt with her twin sister—what an awful boyfriend.”

“Ugh...”

This is bad news! We’re just washing our hands, but it feels like we’re doing something incredibly dirty!

She was right—if this little game continued for much longer, I really would think of it each time we held hands. Obviously, I couldn’t let that happen. However, when I opened my mouth to yell “stop,” that cursed girly squeal nearly escaped my lips for a third time.

Damn it, how can Shigure be so calm?

It wasn’t like she was wearing protection—her hands must’ve felt the same way mine did. Skin sensitivity didn’t vary that much between people. I mean, if something tickled, that was that.

No. There’s no way she’s as composed as she’s letting off.

In any case, I couldn’t remain passive forever; it was time to go on the offensive. I’d twist that poker face into something shameful. I psyched myself up, then squeezed Shigure’s hand in return.

“Ah...” she gasped.

Now, let’s have a look-see. Show me your pathetic—

I turned my gaze toward Shigure, but my thoughts immediately came to a halt and my heart leaped into my throat when I saw her

face.

“Urgh!” I shouted. “I-I’ve had enough of this!”

“W-Wait, Big Bro! I still haven’t cleaned under my nails.”

“Clean them yourself! You should have enough suds by now!”



“Aw, c’mon!” Shigure cried. “You’re dripping soap all over the floor!”

“I’ll clean it up later!”

I fled from the kitchen into the neighboring bathroom, tail tucked between my legs like a pathetic, cowering dog. Can you blame me, though? After all, when I’d squeezed Shigure’s hand back, her expression... had been a perfect reflection of Haruka’s joyful face whenever we were together. It was the very same misty, feverish look.

My heart pounded in my chest, and my face felt as though it was on fire. Although I had started to separate Haruka and Shigure in my mind, her expression in that moment had threatened to reset all my progress. If I screwed up even once, returning to normal would be impossible—the thought haunted me.

Maybe...

A wild idea—self-conscious to the point of absurd—appeared in the back of my mind. At the same time, I reached over to the bathtub’s faucet to rinse the soap off my hands and spied the body wash sitting to the side.

Wait, what?

“Hey,” I called out. “This just occurred to me, but couldn’t we have just used the bodywash from the bathroom?”

“Oh, yeah. I’d forgotten about that,” Shigure replied, playfully sticking out her tongue with a wink. “Sorry, Big Bro.”

That teasing expression again—she’d definitely done that on purpose.

Man, that was a close one.

I’d almost bought into my glaringly virginal delusions. We pathetic sexless peasants needed to know our place in the social hierarchy.

That little temptress would never make the same face as Haruka anyway. After all, my girlfriend made that expression because she loved me. Without a doubt, what I’d seen earlier had been an illusion of the setting sun. Yes, it had all just been an illusion, and nothing more.

Chapter Eight

Reverse X Uniforms

When I arrived home that day, I found Haruka in the living room.

“This has gotta be a bad dream!” I cried. “I’m gonna wake up any second now, right?!”

“Oh, Hiromichi. Sorry for barging in like this.”

“H-Haruka, wh-what are you doing in my apartment?!”

I was immediately overwhelmed by a sense of panic, and a dozen questions erupted so quickly in my head that they practically caused my eyes to roll in their sockets.

Why’s Haruka here? How does she know where I live? What should I do? Should I serve her tea? No, now’s not the time for that! First things first, I need to know if she found out about Shigure, and—wait, where’s Shigure?

As I took a second to breathe, I gave the girl in my living room a long, discerning look. And just as I’d feared, she burst into laughter, that malicious grin plastered across her face.

“Ahahahaha! Your reactions never disappoint!”

“I knew it! It is you, Shigure!” I cried.

“Yep, it’s your adorable little sister. But wow, your responses are always perfect—have you ever looked into acting?”

“Give me a friggin’ break...” I grumbled as I slumped against the wall, completely drained of energy.

Since she’d been wearing Seiun’s uniform, I hadn’t been able to tell for a moment, but the girl in my living room had been Shigure all along. Good lord, she’d almost given me a heart attack—seriously, I think I’d felt my heart stop at least three times. But more importantly...

“Why are you wearing that uniform?” I asked. “Did you buy one?”

“You think we have that kind of money?”

“Then where did you get it from?”

“I exchanged outfits with Haruka, just for today. She wanted to try out Shueikan’s uniform,” Shigure replied without hesitation, puffing out her shapely bust. She’d tucked her shirt in, which made her chest appear bigger than usual. “Also, I really wanted to see how you’d react,” she added with a laugh.

“Well, I’m happy to have met your expectations, goddammit.”

“Ahaha. No need to get your panties in a knot over something as small as this. And anyway, it doesn’t really look like you’re upset over the whole thing.”

Huh? Is she referring to me?

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Haruka and I are identical—from our hairstyles down to our figures. Since I’m wearing her clothes, doesn’t it feel like it’s your very own girlfriend in your apartment?”

“You’re flying a little too close to the sun there, Icarus.”

“Hiromichiii... Can we go back to bed?”

“You lookin’ for a fight, ya little skank?”

“Wait, don’t come any closer with that serial killer look in your eyes! You’re scaring me! What are you planning to do with that 2B pencil in your hand?! I’m sorry! It won’t happen again!”

Geez, what a brat. I placed the 2B pencil I’d reflexively grabbed on top of the tea table.

“My God, talk about terrifying,” Shigure grumbled. “Blowing your fuse over one little joke—do you have no sense of humor?”

“I do if the jokes are actually funny,” I responded.

“Wow! Rude, much?”

“Hurry up and get changed. You must be dying in that uniform without any air conditioning in here.”

“Sorry, but I’ll pass. I was looking forward to wearing this, too. Let me enjoy it for a little longer, please. Oh, this is the perfect opportunity to take some pictures!”

With that, Shigure whipped out her smartphone. Why did girls like taking selfies so much? They’d even post them online. Personally, I didn’t want to leave behind a single picture of myself for future generations.

“Hmm... Something about this isn’t right,” Shigure said. “Big Bro, will you be my photographer?”

“Huh, why me?”

“There are only so many angles and poses you can do yourself when taking a selfie. How about this: if you take a few photos, I’ll change clothes after. But if you don’t take any, then who knows? Maybe I’ll end up wearing this the rest of the day... and since we’re home alone right now, I might even undo a few buttons.”

Shigure looked at me with upturned eyes and loosened her necktie, exposing her damp collarbone. At this point, I only had one option.

“Got it,” I sighed. “C’mon, hand over your phone already.”

“Of course. Make sure they’re cute, though. I’ll start getting ready.”

And with that, Shigure began to slowly peel her socks down, revealing her bare feet.

“Why are you taking those off?” I asked.

“Hm? Bare feet make for a sexier picture, right? It’ll really give

off the ‘your girlfriend just came over to hang out after school’ vibe. Like, ‘If things get a little heated, maybe she’ll let her guard down, and I can push her down on the bed.’ Pretty steamy, don’tcha think?”

Yeah, I definitely get that.

Oh, crap—I’d just agreed with her whole-heartedly, even if only subconsciously. If I’d voiced that aloud, there was no doubt she would have ridiculed me into oblivion again.

This had turned into a matter of life and death—I was completely powerless to her usual teasing as long as she wore Haruka’s uniform. I’d snap a few, quick photos to satisfy her in the hopes that she would change.

“Let me know once you’ve decided on a pose,” I said.

“Alrighty.”

Once she’d settled on a few, I began to snap some photos on her phone. I followed her requests, adjusting the angle and distance, taking snapshot after snapshot. We used the living room as the backdrop, which she took full advantage of. She sat on top of the tatami mat, knees tucked up to her chest, and fiddled coyly with her toes. She spread a notebook open on the tea table and pressed the eraser end of a pencil to her pursed lips, pretending to be deep in thought. Finally, she returned to the mat, where she flopped on her back and peered up at the camera, eyes brimming with desire.

This is steamy as hell, I thought while taking the pictures.

“Hmm,” Shigure suddenly spoke up. “I want to show off my belly button while lying on the ground. Let me untuck my shirt, and then we’ll do it one more time.”

“Ergh...” I grumbled. What should I do?

My heart was racing faster than I’d anticipated. As I photographed her, I’d had to remind myself over and over again that it was Shigure behind the lens. But due to the uniform, I could only see Haruka—it felt like my girlfriend had come over to my apartment and let her guard down in front of me. And whenever Shigure wore a somewhat inviting expression for the camera, my mind would get all muddled trying to distinguish between the two of them. To me, it seemed as if my girlfriend was letting loose at my place.

This is bad.

If this bully noticed my sweaty palms, I’d be a goner. No matter what, I needed to conceal my nerves. In a desperate attempt to hide my expression, I snapped another picture.

By the grace of God, I somehow managed to ride out this photo session. I finally returned Shigure’s phone and let her check the shots.

“Are you satisfied with those?” I asked.

“Wow, you’re pretty good at this. Take a look at this angle—there’s a nice contrast between the setting sun and the shadows.

You've got the makings of a professional upskirt photographer."

"As if I'd be looking for such a niche job in an already tiny field."

"Anyways... when I look at myself in these pictures, I can really see the resemblance I share with Haruka. We obviously have the same face, but even the shape of our perky tits and ass are identical. I can understand why you're absolutely drenched in sweat."

"I am not 'absolutely drenched in sweat,' thanks," I protested. Plus, I didn't exactly want to hear girls talking about tits and ass, "perky" or otherwise—it made me want to run and hide. "You're satisfied now, right? Hurry up and change."

"True, I do need to start making dinner soon. I wouldn't want to get this uniform dirty while I'm cooking."

Thank God. Shigure seems satisfied as well. Now I can finally—

"But before I change, I need to provide you with payment," she said.

"Huh? Payment?"

"Hi-yadi-yadi-yah!"

As I was busy puzzling over her incomprehensible words, Shigure pushed me down and straddled me.

"Huh?" I croaked out, only managing a feeble sound to voice my confusion. "Wha?"

Shigure placed a hand on my chest with her usual, sadistic smile.

"Hehe," she giggled. "Your heart's racing like crazy. You might've called me a 'little skank,' but is that how you really feel? When you see me in this outfit, doesn't it feel like having Haruka in your apartment? How adorable."

"L-Like hell it does," I protested.

"Liar," Shigure whispered mockingly.

Her face steadily approached mine, and, ever so gently, her hair tumbled out from behind her shoulders. The strands caressed my cheeks, and my whole body shuddered, as if I'd been tickled by feathers.

When she noticed this, Shigure's dark, impish smile grew even wider. "'Like hell,' you say?" she asked. "Then why's your heart pounding like a drum?"

"Ugh."

Shigure's beautifully maintained nails lightly traced themselves over my chest. "You're just the worst. I'm not Haruka—just someone with the same DNA as her. So why are you so nervous? Your face is bright red, too. Where did that cool older brother who said he'd accept me with open arms run off to? You really are pathetic. You wouldn't want Haruka to see you like this, would you?"

"I'm just surprised because you pounced on me all of a sudden. Now can you get off me? I'm about to lose my patience for real."

I glared back at Shigure with all the strength I could muster, trying to put on a bold front. In response, she backed her face away from mine, wiggling her red tongue around.

“Sorry,” she said. “I do understand. We’re twins, after all. Of course someone with the same face and body as your girlfriend would cause your heart to race. You’re not in the wrong here. Not at all. I mean, you’re just viewing Haruka through me. In other words, you’re getting excited over your girlfriend, not me. I’m not even on your radar. Isn’t that right?”

“Of course! I’m team Haruka all the way!”

“Still, because I’m a different person... because I’m her twin sister, I can do things for you that a timid, late bloomer like Haruka never could.”

“What are you say—”

Before I could finish asking the question, Shigure got up on her knees and grabbed the hem of her skirt. This girl, Haruka’s doppelganger, began to lift it right before my very eyes.

“As thanks for today,” said Shigure, “I’ll let you have a peek at your beloved Haruka’s panties.”

“H-Hold on a second! I’m begging you! Please don’t do this!” I screamed.

Wh-What the hell is this girl thinking?! I was in a state of complete panic. I tried to get away, frantically scooting away from the temptress, but my back almost immediately met resistance—I’d hit the wall, blocking off my only escape route. Shit, this apartment is too small! There’s nowhere to run!

And while I sat there, immobilized, Shigure’s fingers inched further and further toward the heavens.

“You idiot!” I cried. “Are you insane?! Do you have no sense of shame?!”

“This is a little embarrassing, but I have to thank you somehow, Big Bro.”

“G-Girls shouldn’t do this sort of thing! Have some self-respect!”

“I have plenty of self-respect. You think I’d do this for just about anyone?”

“You don’t have to do it for me either! In fact, if you pull this shit with Haruka’s uniform on, I’ll never for—”

“Hi-yah!”

“Eeeyaaah!”

Shigure flipped her skirt up. Shutting my eyes tight, I swiveled my neck to the side.

I-I can’t believe this girl! She just lifted up her goddamn skirt without the slightest hesitation! No matter how much she enjoys teasing me, this is going way too far!

In any case, I needed to find a way to push her off and escape with my eyes closed.

“Just kidding!” she giggled. “I’m wearing bike shorts underneath!”

Huh?

“Ahaha! That was quite the shriek, Big Bro! Your neck swiveled around like an owl or something! A cute girl is lifting her skirt up as a favor, and you react like you’re possessed by a demon? Why are you so desperate to look away? You’re seriously too precious for words!”

“Guh!”

H-How much more diabolic can she get?! And while wearing Haruka’s clothes, no less!

I was finally at the end of my rope—I wouldn’t stand for this sort of behavior. As Haruka’s boyfriend and Shigure’s older brother, I had to give her a piece of my mind.

“Give it a rest!” I shouted, turning back around to glare at Shigure. “You may be my little sister, but some things are just inexcusable!”

Hey, where did her bike shorts go?

“Uuuuh...” I managed to mumble, losing all my previous steam.

Hold on, what the hell is going on here?! Those can’t be bike shorts! They look exactly like panties! No, they are panties! Okay, it’s not like I’ve ever seen a girl’s panties up close and personal before, but c’mon—they’re pink! And the fabric looks really expensive! This is exactly what they look like in manga! What is she thinking, flipping her skirt up in front of a dude?! I’m going to have a freakin’ heart attack here!

“Haruka normally rolls up her skirt pretty high,” Shigure said. “But to make sure no one sees anything, she wears these little bike shorts underneath. What, you didn’t know that despite being her boyfriend? Or did you just not have the guts to take a peek?”

“N-Not! B-Bike! Sh-Shortsss!” I sputtered between dramatic gasps.

“Hmm? What are you freaking out over? You mean even bike shorts are too stimulating for you? Haha! You’re seriously no better than an animal in heat. If this gets your rocks off, then by all means, stare as long as you like. C’mon, take another peek!”



No, that's not what I'm trying to get at! Does Shigure not realize that she's not wearing bike shorts?! Oh God, don't wiggle your hips like that! The fabric's bunching up around your crotch, and I can see—EEK! This ain't good! This ain't nothin' but trouble! I need to clue her in right now!

“B-Banties!” I cried. “Bantieees!”

I'm so shaken up, I can't even speak correctly! Damn it! How do I let this idiot know what's going on? Oh, right!

All of a sudden, the clouds parted, and a voice from the heavens guided me down the right path. I quickly whipped my phone out of my pocket, snapped a picture of Shigure, and shoved the screen in her face.

“Geez, you even took a picture? You like my bike shorts that much? You really are hopeless. Well, since I'm feeling so generous, you can save it for as long as yo—Huh?”

Shigure had certainly been laughing it up at my expense, but all at once, she fell completely silent. “Hmm?” she mumbled, leaning toward my phone screen and staring fixedly at the picture. After taking some time to think, she rubbed her eyes and inspected the picture one more time.

“Me-me-meeep!” she blurted out an incomprehensible scream. Her face turned bright crimson, as though it would burst into flames at any moment. She hurriedly snatched the phone from me and scurried to the corner of the room in a panic. Her fingers danced across the screen—no doubt she was deleting the picture.

“Umm... Did you happen to see anything?” she asked timidly.

“If I said ‘no,’ would you believe me?”

“Aaaaagh!”

Shigure crumpled on the spot, sinking lower and lower to the ground like a downed battleship. After a few moments of holding her head in her collapsed state, she crawled back into her room through the screen door like some sort of bizarre caterpillar.

From behind the thin screen door, I could hear Shigure mumbling and rolling around.

“H-How did this happen?” she asked. “How come I'm not wearing the bike shorts? Something's not right here—I mean, I borrowed these from Haruka, so there must be some sort of explanation. Oh, come to think of it, the apartment felt pretty humid when I got back... And since I raced over to make sure I got here first, I was sweating like crazy. I felt so gross that I took off... t-took off... aaaaah!”

Exposing her panties to me had seemingly pushed her to the limit. In the end, she didn't come out of her room once for the rest of the day.

Such is the price of desecrating my girlfriend, ye sinner in the hands of a most righteous and wrathful god. Still, she really does lack any sense of shame.

As her older brother, that had come as the biggest surprise.

Chapter Nine

Lovey-Dovey X Signals

The sound of my heart pounded against my eardrums and reverberated inside my head. Likewise, my blood simmered, and my body was soaked in sweat—my pen had threatened to slip out of my slick grip several times already.

I looked away from my untouched workbook and surveyed my surroundings. Unlike the old, somewhat dirty walls of my meager apartment, these were pure white. A carpet, smooth and inviting to the touch, lay across the lustrous wood flooring. On top of the wooden single bed, I spotted a stuffed animal—either a bear or rabbit, I couldn't tell. There was also a closet, a table, and several other pastel furnishings decorating the room. The table I was currently sitting at was round and made of glass; it fit right at home with the rest of the cute, stylish decor. And, finally, on the opposite end of the table was a girl grappling with her textbook.

You can probably tell where I'm going with this, can't you? I'd been invited into Haruka's—in other words, my girlfriend's—very own bedroom! What had triggered such a wonderful event, you might ask? It had been none other than our midterm exams—a prominent source of stress for students everywhere.

It was already June, and with exams right around the corner, all club activities were on break.

Haruka had asked me to help her study today. Sure, I might've been a dunce, but I did attend the AP class of the prestigious Seiun High—at the very least, I could help a regular student like Haruka prepare for her exams. What's more, she was counting on me. How could I have turned her down? So, of course, I'd happily agreed.

And so, after school, we'd headed to the library to prepare for our exams together. Unfortunately, the place had been filled to the brim with students who'd had the same idea as us.

"Oh, wow!" Haruka had cried. "The tables are all packed!"

"My bad," I'd replied. "So I guess this place gets pretty popular before tests, huh?"

What a stupid mistake. I hadn't known that you couldn't find a place to sit before exams. It seemed obvious, but I'd never used the library up until that point; I'd always gone straight home without waiting for club activities to end. Plus, I'd only started dating Haruka this spring.

As an alternative, I'd offered Haruka to study in the AP classroom.

“Hey, Hiromichi...” she’d responded. “Would you like to study at my place instead?”

Those were the events that brought us to the present moment. This was my first time being in a girl’s room—and, most importantly, it was my girlfriend’s room. To be totally honest, it felt like my heart would burst out of my chest.

But, man, girls’ rooms really do have a nice smell to them...

A sweet scent, like flowers or candy, lingered in the air. I’d heard about this strange phenomena from other guys in the past, but I hadn’t believed it until now. Women had to have come from another planet.

No, this is probably just the smell of Haruka’s shampoo or something.

Perhaps she and Shigure used the same brand, because I’d catch whiffs of a similar fragrance whenever I passed by Shigure. But I was getting sidetracked. What really mattered was this nice aroma, one that I’d only caught fleeting hints of before, currently enveloped my entire body. And, most importantly of all, it belonged to my girlfriend. That alone made me happy.

Geez, I needed to ease up on the reins a bit. I was in such high spirits that my brain verged on melting. In fact, if I took a deep breath right now, just how much heavenly bliss would I be blessed with?

Huh? Are you calling me a pervert? Slow down there, partner! This was completely and utterly out of my control.

I’ll give you an example—let’s say a nature lover came upon a vibrant, grassy plain. The first thing they’d do is inhale a lungful of fresh air, right? It was the same deal here. I cared deeply for Haruka. Wanting to sniff her? That was the most natural thing in the world. Absolutely beyond my control, right?

Well then, I’ll be seeing you later, asshole. I’ve got a girlfriend to smell!

“Hey, Hiromichi,” Haruka said.

“Hack! Wheeze!”

“Wh-What’s wrong? Are you sick?”

“No, I just swallowed and it went down the wrong pipe. I’m fine. So... what’s up?”

“For this English problem, why is the word ‘take’ incorrect?”

“Oh, it’s because you’ve mixed up the directions. In this case, you’d use the word ‘bring.’”

Oh shit, that was close!

Cold sweat ran down my back. I’d been flaring my nostrils like a crazed bull, hadn’t I? As a boyfriend, I can’t imagine taking overly eager, huge-ass whiffs of your girlfriend’s room would ever be a good look. I guess I’d gotten swept up in being invited into my girlfriend’s room and fell into a trance of sorts, but I couldn’t let Haruka see me

like this.

I stopped acting like an idiot and redirected my attention to studying. But as you'd expect, I couldn't concentrate in the least. For the first time in my life, I was in a room belonging to the opposite sex—and my girlfriend's, no less. This was her own private slice of the world, where she spent most of her time. And she herself had invited me here. How could anyone expect me to focus on translating what Bob, Nancy, and Taro were discussing? Not happening, chief.

In the end, I came to a different conclusion. Concentration? Screw that noise. I had a much more important objective—I needed to figure out what kind of signals Haruka was sending by inviting me here!

According to the pros online, when girls wanted to take their relationship to the next level, there were several things that they'd do to hint at that fact: they'd start to lean against you more, act spoiled, and send out suggestive signals. Recently, our relationship had taken a huge leap forward. We'd walked home from school while holding hands. Then, not long afterwards, she'd invited me over. This was quite possibly a signal from Haruka that she wanted things to progress... further.

Of course, she could have just been relying on me—an AP student—to help her grades improve. Maybe she was fine with inviting close friends to her room. If I misread any of her signals and overstepped my bounds...

"Urgh," I groaned.

W-What a terrifying thought. I can't let that happen. My heart would shatter into a bajillion pieces.

And so I knew it'd be best to scope these signals out with the utmost caution. Was I just getting my hopes up? Reading too much into things? Before I came to a conclusive decision, I'd need to sear each and every one of Haruka's actions into my retinas!

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"Thanks, Hiromichi!" Haruka exclaimed. "I've never gotten through my homework this fast before!"

"R-Really? Glad to be of help."

"I'm one lucky girl to have a boyfriend in AP," she giggled. "Oh, you've finished your drink. I'll go pour you another glass."

"O-Okay, thanks."

Haruka grabbed the empty glass in question, stood up, and left the room. Once I was certain I was by myself, I cradled my head.

"I can't tell a damn thing!"

Despite having long abandoned my studies to observe Haruka, I hadn't been able to confirm the presence of any signals. So what had I discovered? For starters, Haruka's eyelashes were incredibly long and beautiful. Whenever she encountered a difficult problem, the sighs that escaped from her pouted lips were somewhat arousing. And her bashful smile whenever our eyes met was devastatingly cute.

In other words, I'd discovered how insanely adorable my girlfriend was. Wait, I'd already known that!

Come to think of it, how would I even be able to detect things like that? Isn't that why I've been a virgin for the past 17 years? Man, life is one shitty game—to defeat monster A, you need item B, but monster A's the one that drops that item. Honestly, any more than this is probably a wasted effort.

"I should get back to studying," I sighed.

"Mrow."

"Hm?"

What was that? A weird sound had come from the door which Haruka had left wide open. Out of curiosity, I looked over to where it had come from and was met with the determined stare of a black-and-white spotted cat. Half of its body was already through the door. Come to think of it, Haruka had mentioned owning a cat in an earlier conversation.

"Haruka," I called out to her. "What was your cat's name again?"

"Huh?" she called back to me from the kitchen. "Is Spot over with you?"

"He's staring at me from the door. So he's called 'Spot,' huh? I thought that was usually a dog's name."

"Yeah, but look at his eyes—those peepers could spot you from a mile away!"

"You're not talking about his fur...?"

What an incredible name. Still, she's not wrong about that glint in his eyes. No bird would stand a chance.

I liked both cats and dogs, but if I had to pick a favorite, I would definitely be on team cat. Dogs were so loyal that they made a deadbeat like me feel guilty in some way. But since cats were also deadbeats, I didn't hate myself as much being around them.

"Here kitty, kitty!" I called out.

"Mroooow."

I clicked my tongue and tried to beckon him over, and Spot entered the room. He was a rather plump specimen, likely twice the size of your average stray. He made a beeline toward me and climbed up onto my lap.

M-My legs!

"You're a big fellow, aren'tcha?" I asked.

I stroked his small cheek, and Spot began to purr in response. Based on his level of friendliness, he must have been a seriously spoiled feline.

“Hm?”

As I continued to pet Spot, I noticed something stuck to one of his hindlegs. Due to the shadow cast by his rather rotund body, it hadn't stood out as he approached. What was it? Tissue paper? I felt sorry for the poor guy, so I decided to remove it for him.

It was a simple piece of cloth, and it was quite nice to touch... silky smooth, in fact. I'd never felt anything like this before. It was triangle-shaped, with a small ribbon decorating its lustrous, white surface, and—oh my fucking God, these are women's panties!

“Mmmmm!” Somehow, I managed to smother my scream, causing my ears to ring from internal pressure.

C'mon, these were definitely panties! After seeing Shigure's not too long ago, I think I could consider myself a bit of an expert on the matter! What's more, the only other person Haruka lived with was her dad—in other words, any panties in this household were 100% the property of my girlfriend.

Wh-What the hell did you bring me, Spot?!

“He's a chonker, isn't he?” Haruka, who was still in the kitchen, called out. “When we first adopted him, Spot was nothing but skin and bones, but my dad dotes on cats so much that he got a bit of a belly. But tubby cats are cute, right?”

“O-Oh, for sure. When it comes to cats, the fatter the better... Yep.”

Spot was round and adorable. A round, adorable little bastard.

Shit, this is bad. Haruka's voice is getting closer and closer. Cold sweat erupted from my entire body. What could I do? If she found me gripping these, it would definitely cause a misunderstanding. But if I threw them on the ground, how would I explain the situation? Maybe just flippantly saying, “Oh, the cat brought them,” would work?

Ugh, this sucks! It might be the truth and all, but that explanation sucks eggs!

I was in a horrible panic. Even so, time cruelly continued to march forward. While I was busy freaking out, Haruka steadily approached the room.

“Sorry for the wait,” she said. “Ahaha. Spot climbed up on your lap, huh? Come over here, big guy. You're bothering Hiromichi.”

“Mrow...”

“Oh, he just answered with a yawn. He's really taken a liking to you, Hiromichi. If he gets to be too much to handle, just push him off.”

“N-No problem here. I like cats.”

“Really? Looks like you’re in luck, Spot.”

Haruka—a wide smile on her face—patted him while he was still perched on my lap. I’d only managed to avoid her noticing the aforementioned “item” by quickly stuffing them into my trouser’s pocket. However, I immediately regretted my decision—after all, I’d just turned myself into a goddamn panty thief!

I’d dug my own grave the moment I’d pocketed them. This “dangerous article” was essentially a ticking time bomb that would likely blow our relationship to smithereens. I needed to deal with them as soon as possible without attracting Haruka’s attention.

But how? Could I hide them somewhere in this room? Yeah, that was definitely one solution. Still, these panties had come from elsewhere. Suppose Haruka had worn this pair yesterday and just washed them. If she remembered that and discovered them in her room, she might connect that inconsistency to me—the guest.

Where could I hide these panties so that Haruka would never find them, then? I wouldn’t exactly feel great about stuffing them behind her dresser. And, of course, bringing them home was obviously out of the question. I racked my brain, trying to figure out the best course of action for both Haruka and myself.

“Hiromichi,” Haruka spoke up, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Are you feeling hot?”

“Huh?! Why do you ask?”

“Because you’re sweating like crazy.”

“Umm, n-no, I’m not particularly warm or anything...”

“Then are you feeling under the weather? You were even coughing a few minutes ago...”

Haruka looked at me with concerned eyes. She must’ve started to worry about me because of my pained expression. She was so kind! I seriously liked her!

At this point, I was practically swelling up like a balloon with guilt. Still, it’s not like I could say, “Oh, I’m just sweating buckets over here because I’ve got your panties stuffed inside my pocket, and I’m worried you’ll find out.”

On the other hand, her question had given me an idea. Feeling under the weather? I could do something with that!

“I’m not feeling sick or anything,” I said, “but I have needed to use the restroom for a while now.”

“Huh? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Well, it felt like bad manners to use my girlfriend’s restroom, I guess...”

“Oh, is that all? What a silly thing to worry about. I’ll show you where it is right now. Follow me.”

“Thanks. You’re a lifesaver.”

When I returned from the restroom, I would leave the panties outside her room. After all, Spot had originally brought them in from outside. Rather than disposing of the evidence in her room, it wouldn't feel as strange for Haruka to stumble across them somewhere else. Furthermore, most houses were designed to have their water facilities in the same vicinity. That meant that the restroom and bathroom—which housed the washing machine—tended to be right next to each other. If I casually dropped the panties next to the washing machine, she wouldn't be any the wiser.

I've pretty much done a lifetime of sweating over one damn cat.

As I complained to myself, I tried brushing Spot—who'd curled up on my lap—away in order to stand. Yet even when I nudged him, he stubbornly refused to budge. I had no other choice. I placed my hands beneath his belly and tried to lift him up. In response, his claws dug into my trousers.

Stubborn bastard!

I was out of ideas, so I resorted to pulling up even harder, forcibly ripping him away. At that moment, disaster struck. Spot must have hooked onto the panties during his resistance. When I finally successfully peeled him away, his claws pulled them smoothly from my pocket.

“Eeeek!” I screamed.

Haruka stared at the panties half-protruding from my pocket, eyes wide in shock. “Huh? Hiromichi, those... are my... What's going on?!”

Th-This is the worst! The worst possible timeline! I need to explain myself!

“This is all a huge misunderstanding!” I cried. “I didn't do anything! It was all Spot! He had these stuck to his leg when he came into the room! But I was afraid of causing a misunderstanding if I just left them here, so I stuffed them in my pocket! I wasn't trying to steal them! I was hoping to secretly drop them beside the washing machine on my way to the restroom! P-Please believe me!”

In my panicked state, I'd rattled off a long-winded explanation. Suddenly, a memory resurfaced from the back of my mind—a long time ago, I'd seen a news story about a man overseas accused of owning illegal pornography. As an excuse, he'd blamed his cat for accidentally “saving” the files onto his computer. Had anyone believed him in the end? I definitely hadn't, at the very least.

Yeah, this story is way too unrealistic for Haruka to believe me. Ah, it's over. My first relationship... just crumbled right before my very eyes...

“O-Oh, is that what happened?” Haruka said.

What?

“C’mon, Hiromichi, don’t scare me like that!”

“Haruka, you really believe me?” I asked, incredulous.

“Of course I do. I’m your girlfriend, after all. I know you’re not the kind of person to do that sort of thing. But if you were so worried about a misunderstanding, that must mean you don’t trust me enough yet... I’m a little disappointed by that.”

Haruka puffed out her cheeks, but she wasn’t actually angry. No, she was sulking in a jocular manner. In other words, she actually believed my story. She really, truly trusted a guy like me from the bottom of her heart.

Would I ever encounter another person across this vast, expansive world who viewed me with such affirmation? Would I ever experience anything more rewarding than this? A deep love for the girl in front of me overflowed from my chest. Driven by these powerful emotions, I instinctively extended a hand toward Haruka, barely able to breathe.

“Oh...” she whispered.

My fingertips brushed her hair. For a brief moment, she seemed surprised, then she closed her eyes and used my palm to caress her cheek.

Yeah, I can read this one.

Haruka and I were both sending signals. We could both feel it from one another. Right now, I could slide my hand toward the nape of her neck and pull her in for an embrace.

Ding-dong!

“Uwah!” we both shouted in unison, jumping in response to the shrill doorbell.

The heat of the moment quickly faded, as if we’d been doused with cold water. Immediately, our closeness grew awkward, and we both averted our eyes.

“That was incredible timing,” Haruka noted with a laugh. “Just like in the manga you lent me recently.”

“Y-Yeah, I guess this does happen, even in reality...”

“I’ll go see who it is, okay?”

“O-Of course.”

Haruka fled from the room, her face so red that it even reached her ears. Somehow, it felt as though I’d let a critical moment slip past me.



If things had continued in that same direction, I would have been able to embrace Haruka.

No, based on the mood, I might've been able to... k-kiss her.

That thought left me seething. Who the hell was at the door? If it was that friggin' tax collector again, I'd be furious. Those guys could eat horse shit and die.

"Oh, it's you," Haruka's voice came from the front door.

"Welcome home, Dad."

The father?! Of my girlfriend?!

"Good to see you, Haruka." I could faintly hear a man's voice.

"What's wrong? Why did you ring the doorbell?"

"I managed to get out of work early for the first time in a while, but I forgot my house key inside my desk. Good thing you were home. Hm? I don't recognize these shoes. Do you have a friend over?"

"Not just a friend—you know, the one I'm always talking about..."

"Oh, your boyfriend. Hiromichi, right?"

"Yeah! I asked him to come help me study, since tests are coming up soon."

"Is that so? Am I interrupting anything?"

"Kind of."

"Hearing you put it so plainly makes me a little sad. Still, if the young man who's involved with my daughter is here, I should introduce myself to him."

E-Eeeeee! I screamed internally as his voice and footsteps grew closer. This was way too soon! I hadn't prepared myself at all! What was a guy supposed to say when meeting his girlfriend's parents?! During these situations, I would usually ask for Professor Gaggles' advice, but there was no time for that right now.

A large, middle-aged man appeared in the open doorway, scrutinizing me through black-rimmed glasses.

"Good evening," he greeted me. "You're Hiromichi—my daughter's boyfriend, correct? Nice to meet you."

"Y-Yes! Good evening! I'm Hiromichi Satou!" I practically shouted, shooting to my feet to give a polite bow. How in the world could I respond to my girlfriend's father with my ass on the floor?! I'd had a total brain fart!

Only the sound of my pounding heart reverberated within my vacant head.

Th-Think of something, Hiromichi! What do manga protagonists say to their girlfriend's parents during these scenes? What's the standard... s-standard... greeting?!

"I promise to make your daughter the happiest girl in the world!" I shouted.

Wait, what did I just say?! Sure, it was “standard”—I’ve seen it in literally every manga! But was this actually the right time for that, you idiot?!

In response to my hasty, overconfident greeting, Haruka’s dad laughed, his shoulders shaking slightly. “You certainly are an eager one. Once you’re an adult, I’d like to hear that one more time.”

“Ergh!”

Oh, crap. He definitely thinks I’m weird.

“Still, it’s good to have a sense of responsibility,” he added.

“Huh?” I blurted out in response.

“As a parent, when I heard that my daughter had a boyfriend, I worried about what type of guy you’d be. But in your case, I can relax. You haven’t dyed your hair, and you don’t have any piercings. You look like an honest and sincere young man.”

Surprisingly, Haruka’s father had interpreted my blunder favorably. Come to think of it, when I’d gotten ahead of myself before, Haruka had also been happy. As father and daughter, they probably had similar sensibilities.

“Truly, thank goodness,” Haruka’s dad continued. “If your hair had been blond or red, I wouldn’t have known what to do. At your age, no decent guy would dye their hair or get piercings.”

“Er...”

“How about it, Hiromichi? Seeing as I’m finally home early for the first time in forever, I was going to take my daughter out to eat. Would you like to come with us? Now’s the perfect time for dinner.”

When I looked at the clock, I noticed it was already past 6:30PM. A lengthy amount of time had passed without my notice. Still, I couldn’t stay.

“Thank you for the invitation, but my family’s making dinner currently,” I replied.

After all, I hadn’t told Shigure that I didn’t need dinner today. By now, she would likely be busy preparing the food. Even though we’d divided up the housework, I couldn’t turn down Shigure’s meals after she’d gone through the trouble of making them. As someone who merely ate the food, that would be pretty low.

Also, while he seemed like a good person, I knew it would be difficult to enjoy any food while my girlfriend’s dad was present.

“I’m going home for today,” I announced.

“Oh, already?” Haruka’s dad asked. “In that case, never mind. Spending quality time with your family is important... very important indeed. Well then, let’s have dinner together another day. Haruka, why don’t you say goodbye to Hiromichi at the door?”

“Okay, Dad.”

Once Haruka had seen me off, I began my walk home. She waved

to me the entire time.

After I was out of her line of sight, my shoulders slumped from exhaustion. Honestly, I was exhausted. A lot had taken place during my first visit to Haruka's house—the incident with the cat and the panties, and meeting her dad. It had been one hell of a day.

But at the very least, I could celebrate the fact that Haruka's dad appeared to like me. Just like my girlfriend, he gave off the impression that he was a good person. I felt a great sense of relief in that fact. I mean, since he was also Shigure's dad, he could have ended up being more like her—now that idea terrified me. Thank God that hadn't been the case.

Still, because he'd seemed like such a good-natured person...

"At your age, no decent guy would dye their hair or get piercings."

...those sharp words, so filled with revulsion, had left a bizarrely strong impression on me.

Chapter Ten

Surprise Attack X Sugar Love

It was around 10:00PM on a weekday.

“Alrighty then, my overtime as a high-school girl ends now,” Shigure proclaimed, finishing her homework and tossing her mechanical pencil on top of the tea table for emphasis.

“Good job,” I replied. “And fast, too. Goes to show why you have the second highest grades in our year.”

“Hurry up and finish, Big Bro. I wanna play Mushroom Kart together. You can go ahead and copy mine if you want.”

“No, there’s no point in doing that.”

“Rude. Are you implying that I got all the answers wrong?”

“No, I meant that the homework itself loses meaning. The goal shouldn’t be just to finish.”

“I mean, you’re not wrong, but it sounds weird coming from you of all people. Cut it out already—you’re making me feel like a dumb bimbo.”

“That’s your problem.”

Incidentally, I still had a lot of work to do. We’d received a formidable pile of homework for every single subject today.

“Midterms might be behind us, but that doesn’t mean you get to slack off!” the bloodthirsty AP teachers seemed to laugh at us.

“And after I’m done with my homework, I’m going to prep for tomorrow’s lessons,” I continued. “If you want to play games, you’ll have to do it solo.”

“What? That’s so boring! Games are only fun when you’re playing with the person next to you.”

“Then why don’t you prepare for tomorrow, too?” I suggested.

“Is there any point to studying in advance and reviewing, anyway? I tend to understand something after hearing it once, and I don’t forget it either.”

“If you say that to me during college entrance exams, I might kill you.”

“From my perspective, those who need to review that much must be slacking off in class,” she explained.

I see. That’s certainly one way of looking at things.

Well, the ability to focus differed from person to person. There were even people who could memorize enormous strings of letters or numbers from just a single glance—maybe Shigure was one of them.

“Also, a total knockout like me doesn’t need to study,” she continued. “From the moment I was born, I hit the genetic lottery.

Learning a little psychology might not hurt, though—that way, I can unlock the secrets to getting men wrapped around my little finger.”

“You already seem quite proficient at that,” I retorted.

“I owe it all to you, Big Bro. I couldn’t have asked for a better punching bag.”

“How kind of you to say.”

Shigure already got on my nerves constantly, and I was just her brother. I pitied her future husband—he would have one hell of a rough life, completely and utterly whipped till he was black and blue. Then again, any man who couldn’t see past Shigure’s looks deserved that fate. I couldn’t bring myself to feel too sorry for the guy.

“Unlike yours, my face is no money maker,” I said. “And since I’m prone to screwing up, I have to do this sort of thing. Just turn on the TV if you’re not interested in studying or playing games alone. Make sure you keep the volume down, though—it’s already pretty late.”

“You’d seriously refuse an invitation from your girlfriend’s spitting image? How cold.”

“No matter what you look like, you’re not Haruka,” I reminded her.

“So if I were Haruka, you’d give me more attention?” she asked.

“And the point of discussing impossible, hypothetical situations is...?”

“You’re right. Well then, I’ll play a game that works even while you’re studying.”

Huh? What is she talking about?

I glared at Shigure from the corner of my eye, and she returned her trademark malicious smile.

“Let’s have a staring contest,” she said. “I won’t take my eyes off of you, so if you break concentration and stop studying, I win.”

“Nah, I’m not doing that.”

“This is happening whether you’re a part of it or not. Okay then, let’s start!”

She’s going to do this against my will? Talk about pushy.

Shigure placed an elbow on the opposite side of the table, propped her face up with one hand, and began to stare at me intently. Ugh...

Being examined this closely was embarrassing. And since Shigure had the same face as my beloved Haruka, it felt like my girlfriend was the one staring at me. It caused my heart to race.

I, for my part, did my best to look away and focus on the task at hand—well, to be more precise, I tried my best to. Yet, even with my gaze averted, I could still sense Shigure’s eyes on me. When I glanced in her direction, I could see that she still had her eyes firmly locked on

me, not seeming the least bit bored.

She relaxed her elbow, placed her cheek on the table, and looked at me with upturned eyes. From underneath her lashes, I could see myself reflected in her large, round pupils.

Damn. There's no denying it—she's cute.

No one would refute her self-proclaimed status as a “knockout.” Plus, she knew how to flaunt her charm. Whenever Shigure put on that flirtatious act of hers, she was even harder to resist than her sister. If Haruka hadn't been my girlfriend, this little temptress probably would have driven me crazy... the keyword here being if. Unfortunately for her, I did have Haruka.



For that reason alone, I couldn't let Shigure have her way. She wouldn't break my concentration.

I returned to my studies, practically burying my face in my notebook and narrowing my line of sight. This had decent results at first, as it allowed me to focus on solving math equations for a while.

Yet, before long, a slender, white finger sprouted from my upper field of vision. The finger, of course, belonged to Shigure. I did my best to ignore it before the lustrous nail began clawing at the corner of my notebook.

Scratch. Scratch scratch scratch.

That was the straw that broke the camel's back. I'd had enough.

"Oh, for God's sake!" I shouted. "What are you trying to accomplish?!"

"Looks like I'm the winner. No need to dwell on why you lost. Just come over and play some games with me."

"You never laid that rule out in the first place! Also, why the hell are you scratching at my notebook?!"

"You mixed up the numbers here—that nine is supposed to be a six."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?!"

Damn, she's right. I'd screwed up the values at the start of the equation, right where Shigure's finger had been scratching. Guess narrowing my field of vision had come back to bite me in the ass. With a heavy heart, I restarted the problem.

"You're quite the little Poindexter," Shigure noted with exasperation. "Whenever you have time, it's just study, study, study. Don't you ever hang out with friends? No part-time jobs or anything?"

"I used to hang out with my friends pretty often, but... now that you mention it, it has been a while."

Usually, my friends and I would play games at my place until the crack of dawn. However, between Shigure's move-in, midterms, Tomoe's part-time job, and Takeshi's club activities, none of our schedules had lined up in a while. As a result, we hadn't had the opportunity to chill together in a long time.

"I do plan on getting a part-time job during summer break," I noted. "How else am I gonna buy Haruka a birthday present? Still, I'd like to take summer classes, as well. I'm hoping I can make both work."

"What good is all that studying going to do? Are you aiming for a certain job?"

"Not really," I answered, shaking my head.

As of right now, I didn't have a dream job or a particular major in mind—this was despite the fact that I was aiming for one of the Imperial Universities.

“Seeing as there’s nothing I really feel like doing, I might as well study,” I explained.

“Huh?”

“My dad told me this a long time ago: ‘If you have a dream, chase after it with all you’ve got. Depending on the situation, you can even drop out of school if you want. But if you don’t have any dreams in particular, you might as well buckle down and study hard. That way, even if you decide on your path at a later time, your academic history won’t hold you back.’”

“Wow. This might sound rude, but that’s a rather decent opinion coming from my stepfather,” Shigure noted.

“You’re right about that. My dad didn’t decide to become a paleontologist until way after he’d gotten out of high school and into the workforce. That must’ve caused him a lot of grief.”

My dad had graduated from a technical high school and worked in a small factory. After quitting that job, he’d been unemployed for four years. Eventually, he managed to get into Tokyo University in his 30s and then went on to study abroad at a Canadian university. Even as his son, I found my dad’s career history quite impressive. Thanks to his academic background, that middle-aged dinosaur nerd had been able—somehow or another—to make a living doing what he loved.

“I don’t have any particular talents, but at the very least, I can do well in school,” I explained. “A guy like me has no other choice than to study hard.”

My experience differed greatly from athletes, artists, and those in specialized fields. Their worlds had a clear divide: those who had aptitude, and those who didn’t. Meanwhile, the world of academics—in other words, college entrance exams—contained clear-cut answers. There was also a fixed route in which to derive those answers. Through effort and perseverance, I could eventually make something of myself.

“And if I never find out what I want to do... even a screwup like me can work at a first-rate company or become a government official in this country. All that matters is that I graduate from a good university. I mean, the last thing I want is for Haruka to be poor.”

“Huh?” Shigure spat, jerking back. “You’re already thinking that far ahead? Wee-woo! Clingy guy alert! We’ve got a stage five situation over here!”

“Sh-Shut up,” I protested. “It’s better than not thinking about anything, right?”

From a girl’s perspective, that must have come across as gross. Yeah, I might have been getting ahead of myself, but honestly, spending time with my girlfriend and not thinking about the future would be too difficult for me.

"I guess I see your point," Shigure said, interrupting my internal sulking session. "Plus, I wouldn't want you becoming Haruka's sugar baby. I'll stop interrupting your study sessions from now on."

She stood up and walked over to the kitchen. Curious, I glanced at Shigure to find her warming up the kettle. Perhaps she was planning on brewing some coffee? In any case, she seemed to have given up on her little game.

Yeah, like I'm dumb enough to fall for that.

By now, I was all too aware of how this girl operated. Could I expect her to back down just because I'd made a good point? Not a chance. She'd never do anything that commendable. She would pretend to give me some space, build up her strength, then crush me with an almighty blow. It was because of this absolute certainty that I couldn't let my guard down.

A little while later, Shigure approached me again.

See, what did I tell you?

Unfortunately for her, I'd remained vigilant; she wouldn't be able to find any chinks in my armor. I decided to make the first move this time by glaring daggers at her, my threatening gaze saying, "What is it this time, ya little punk?"

"Here you go," Shigure said, offering me one of the two mugs she was holding. "This one's for you."

"Huh?"

"It's black coffee," she explained. "Since you're studying, I thought it would be better to leave out the milk and sugar."

"You brewed a cup for me, too?"

"Don't think too much of it. Boiling the water takes the same amount of time, whether you're making one cup or two."

Shigure plopped down across from me and used the remote controller to turn on the television. She quickly lowered the volume and began to watch some random show, her mug pressed to her lips.

Has she actually given up?

While I was still jumping at shadows, Shigure spoke up, her eyes still fixed to the television. "Like I said earlier, you might be clingy, but I find that charming. Men who actually think about the future are far more attractive than your average, brainless ape."

"O-Oh... Thanks."

Honestly, hearing that does make me feel a little happy.

I was completely taken aback by the sudden shift. I pressed the black coffee to my lips, attempting to hide my embarrassment, but instead almost immediately spilled the entire contents of the mug.

"Gah!" I cried. "This is sweet as hell! It feels like my teeth are going to fall out!"

"Aha! That must be all the love I put into it," she laughed.

“Don’t lie to me! You must’ve crammed at least five packs of sugar in here!”

Satisfied, Shigure laughed uproariously. “No, it’s love! Absolutely nothing but love, I promise! Would I lie?”

I let my guard down for even a moment, and this shit happens. I guess love really can come in many forms, including malicious ones, huh?

Despite my exasperation, I figured that having a copious amount of sugar on top of the caffeine would help me study. With that sort of glass-half-full mentality in mind, I returned to my homework while sipping on my liquified candy. Still, once I’d taken its cloying sweetness into account, I had to admit—Shigure could brew a fine cup of coffee.

Chapter Eleven

Love X Bias

“Ta-da!” Haruka cried. “Take a look at this, Hiromichi!”

We received the results for our midterms at the beginning of June. Haruka had invited me to the cafeteria during lunch break, and she wasted no time proudly thrusting her answer sheets in my face as soon as I sat down. While her best grades were B’s, they also got as low as D’s. All in all, she’d managed to pass everything with a C average.

“These are my best grades yet! ” Haruka exclaimed, beaming. “And it’s all thanks to your help.”

My study methods—which even a dunce like me could understand—had been the perfect match for Haruka. Because of that, she’d scored her new “personal bests” across the board. Seeing as she shared the same genes as Shigure, my girlfriend had a much better handle on things than me.

“Well, I’m glad that my stupidity could be of service,” I remarked.

“Which is why I’d like to have a victory celebration today,” Haruka replied. “Everything’s on me. What would you like to eat? Say the word, and I’ll race over and buy it.”

“No need—just being able to study with you was incredibly fun.”

I was being completely honest. Studying with my girlfriend had always been a dream of mine, which meant I’d already reaped my rewards.

But Haruka wasn’t willing to budge despite my insistence. “I had fun as well,” she said. “But, on top of that, you also helped improve my grades. So please let me buy you lunch. It’s the least I can do. If I can’t do anything for you right now... it’ll make it difficult to ask for help in the future.”

“Oh crap. We can’t be having that.”

I needed Haruka to rely on me for this term’s finals and the following midterms—no, for the rest of our lives! And so I decided to accept her offer.

“Well then, I’ll have one yakisoba bread and two meat cutlets,” I said.

“Sir, yes, Sir! I—Private Haruka—will fulfill my mission and return posthaste!”

With a theatrical salute, Haruka skipped over to the cafeteria’s snack bar.

She’s so cute.

Just seeing her practically bouncing as she walked away filled me with indescribable joy. After all, Haruka was buying food for me. This adorable girl was doing her best to make me happy. I couldn't ask for anything more. God, thank you for allowing me to live on this beautiful earth long enough to experience this.

"What's with that dopey grin?" "Wha—?!"

Suddenly, I heard Haruka's voice from behind me. I whirled around in surprise, my eyes practically popping out of their sockets, only to see Shigure. The only way I could tell it was her was due to the different uniform. She was holding a cafeteria tray in both hands.

"Oh, it's just you," I said.

"Just me? Is that any way to speak to your adorable little sister?"

Since the cafeteria was so loud, I guess Shigure felt she didn't have to hide our sibling relationship.

Her large eyes caught sight of the answer sheets atop the table. "Oh?" she blurted out. "Are these Haruka's answer sheets?"

"They are."

"Wow. For someone who's always hated studying, these are some pretty decent scores."

"She usually barely scrapes by, if that. This time, though, she studied her heart out—with me as her partner."

"Oh right, you did mention that. I see. They do say if you want to learn a foreign language, you should date someone there. I guess that applies here too, in a way. Speaking of which, where's the owner of these tests?"

"Haruka's buying me lunch as thanks for helping her. She's over there right now," I replied as I pointed over at the entrance of the snack bar, where Haruka was currently being jostled about by the crowd.

Shigure let out an exaggerated sigh. "You just started going out, and you're already treating her like a sugar mama?"

"Oh, c'mon. As far as repayment goes, this is perfectly reasonable."

"Still, if you're gonna be eating with Haruka, I guess I'll take my leave now."

"Huh? Why?"

"Say Haruka runs into us while we're together. We have everything to lose and nothing to gain in that scenario. It would be a complete catastrophe if you accidentally let our living situation slip."

"How dumb do you think I am? We can at least have lunch together. I'm sure Haruka would be happy with that, too."

"Also, I feel like looking at your stupid face for too long will only make it hard to suppress the urge to bully you."

“On that note, you should leave right now. Chop, chop!” I cried, waving my hand to shoo my would-be tormenter away.

If Shigure teased me as she usually did in front of Haruka, I don’t think I’d ever be able to recover my pride as a boyfriend.

Unfortunately, I was a little too late.

“Ah, Shigure!” Haruka exclaimed. “Hi there!”

“What a disaster...” Shigure groaned quietly.

Haruka had returned, lunch in hand, much faster than we’d expected. I’d underestimated the physical capabilities of an actress—after all, the band and drama clubs were sometimes grouped in with the athletic teams.

“Here you go,” she said, placing my food in front of me. “One yakisoba bread and two meat cutlets.”

“Th-Thanks.”

“Are you joining us for lunch, Shigure?” Haruka asked.

“I suppose so. Hiromichi looked so lonely sitting at this big table all by himself, so I figured I’d grace him with my presence in case nobody joined him.”

“Hey, I’ve got friends!” I interjected. “They’re just, uh... all sick today...”

“So it would seem,” Shigure replied. “I wouldn’t want to intrude on a couple’s private time, though. I’ll go find another place to sit.”

Shigure tried to leave, but, as expected, Haruka stopped her.

“Why don’t you sit with us, then?” she asked.

“Thanks for the invite, but I’ll have to pass,” Shigure replied. “I don’t exactly want to be the third wheel here.”

“But all the other tables are full,” her sister astutely pointed out.

“Erm...”

When I surveyed my surroundings, I found the cafeteria more packed than I’d ever seen it before—all of the chairs were occupied besides the extras at our table. There had been plenty of options while Shigure and I had been talking. Where the hell had all these perfectly-timed backsides sprouted up from?

Shigure was already holding on to a cafeteria tray, so I felt reluctant to chase her away from the only open spot.

“Hiromichi, do you mind if Shigure eats with us?” Haruka asked.

“O-Of course not,” I replied. “I don’t mind at all. Why don’t you join us, Shigure?”

“See? Even Hiromichi says it’s okay,” Haruka insisted.

“In that case, how could I refuse...?” Shigure mumbled.

Shigure plopped down next to Haruka, completely defeated. She glared at me reproachfully from across the table. Ever since we’d started living together, we’d grown accustomed to this sort of nonverbal communication. We began to have a heated conversation

through eye contact alone.

“Why didn’t you refuse?” Shigure asked.

“How could I say no?” I responded. “There aren’t any other seats anyway. I don’t want to make Haruka think I’m an asshole.”

“Couldn’t you have just spouted some sappy line? Something like, ‘But Haruka, our time together is too precious to be interrupted!’ You can’t do anything right, can you?”

“Well, I know for a fact that that wouldn’t have made her happy.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right about that.”

Shigure was all too aware of Haruka’s disposition—they were twins, after all. With no further counterarguments in mind, she finally dropped the matter.

“In any case, we’ll have to cooperate and ride this out together,” said Shigure.

“Please just don’t torment me in front of Haruka—I have my dignity as a boyfriend to uphold.”

“Who do you take me for? I won’t make any comments about your ‘dignity’—or lack thereof—and I don’t intend to make Haruka feel awkward in any way. More importantly, don’t you dare slip up and say something about our living situation.”

“Y-Yeah, I’ll be careful.”

Shigure really was a completely different person as soon as she left the confines of our apartment. At home, she caused me nothing but trouble, but at school, she actually came across as... reliable. It all went to show just how much she valued Haruka.

So that’s how the three of us ended up having lunch together. Shigure quickly—and rather shrewdly—brought up our recent midterms, allowing her to lead the discussion and prevent any personal matters from cropping up. Quick as a whip, that one. I hopped in on occasion, filling in the conversation by grumbling about our teachers. And just like that, lunchtime flew by without too much incident.

Alas, if only that could have lasted. Near the end of our break, Haruka brought up a new topic—one that required some delicacy.

“Speaking of which, you two sit next to each other in class, right? Do you get along?”

“Um...”

My heart started racing. Had Haruka had mistaken us for friends? Did I mess up and act too enthusiastic when I’d spoken with Shigure? While that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, Haruka and Shigure were identical—even the slightest trigger could give rise to suspicion. If that were directed at me, I wouldn’t mind, but I was worried that Haruka would beat herself up over the matter.

“Not at all,” I replied, trying to make myself as clear as possible. “In fact, the two of us are more like cats and—OUCH!”

“He’s just joking,” Shigure quickly added after a swift, covert kick to my shin. “We’re on pretty friendly terms—we exchange greetings when we see each other and all that. But we haven’t spoken to each other much since the seating plan changed after midterms.”

My shin! This girl kicked me right in the goddamn shin!

“What was that for?” I asked, glaring at Shigure.

“Quit being such a dumbass,” she replied with a look a hundred times more venomous than mine. “It’s a huge red flag for us girls if our boyfriend is a prick to our friends. And I’m not just a friend—I’m Haruka’s little sister. Do you seriously want her to hate you?”

Huh, is that right? I floundered. Speaking from a guy’s perspective, I couldn’t care less if my girlfriend despised my group of pals. In fact, I had no interest in who my buddies were dating. Was I the only one who felt that way?

“There’s no need to act too distant,” Shigure explained. “Just treat me like a friend you’d say ‘hi’ to at the mall.”

“O-Okay, sorry. You’re a lifesaver.”

The more intricate our lie became, the easier it would be to see through. I nodded to show Shigure I appreciated the backup. However, Haruka tilted her head in response, seeming unconvinced.

“Really?” she asked. “I would have thought that you two were good friends.”

“Wh-What?” I stammered. “Wh-Why would you think that?”

“I mean, you call Shigure by her first name. Since it took you such a long time before you started calling me ‘Haruka,’ I figured you two must be on good terms.”

I immediately received another direct kick to the shin.

“You really are useless,” Shigure chided. “This is why I didn’t want to have lunch together.”

“My sincerest apologies.”

I had no room to defend myself. This had, without a shadow of a doubt, been my mistake. I made a conscious effort to call her “Shigure” at home, and I’d ended up unconsciously dragging that habit to school with me.

Damn. It took me two weeks to call Haruka by her first name. I’m in deep shit right now. How am I supposed to get out of this one...?

“My family name is Satou now—the same as Hiromichi,” Shigure explained. “That made calling each other by our last names weird, so we decided to address each other by our first names. It’s not because we’re particularly close or anything.”

“Oh, I see,” Haruka said. “Since I only call you Shigure, I’d forgotten, but most people would address you as ‘Satou’ now.”

Shigure, you're an angel! A devious, lying angel! And it's thanks to that that we're going to make it out of here in one piece!

I really could count on Shigure—the shimmering halo floating above her head told me as much. I had no doubts now that we could get through this.

“Still,” Haruka spoke up. “I’d like it if you two could get closer.”

Haruka seemed discontent at our shallow relationship, which threw me for a loop. She wanted someone—identical to her, mind you—to get along with her boyfriend? Wasn’t that just asking for trouble?

“Why’s that?” Shigure asked, somewhat surprised.

“You’ve always been pretty shy ever since we were kids,” Haruka explained.

“Huh? You’re talking about me?”

“Yeah. From what I’ve seen, Shigure isn’t the least bit shy,” I chimed in.

“But she is,” Haruka insisted. “Sure, she appears sociable with everyone at a glance, but she doesn’t let others in, and she won’t join groups without an invitation. That’s called being shy, right?”

Yeah, now that she mentions it...

Shigure wasn’t exactly rude or anything, but when it came to social interactions, she only did the bare minimum. Beyond that, I couldn’t recall her actively involving herself with others. Yeah, perhaps that could be defined as “shyness.”

“Since we’re already juniors, I was a little worried that you’d end up left out when you enrolled here,” Haruka continued. “But everything will be just fine if you’re already friends with Hiromichi—after all, he’s someone you can always count on!”

“Bahaha!” Shigure and I erupted into laughter simultaneously.

I mean, me? Reliable? Where the hell did Haruka get that from?! I was the last person anyone could ever “count on.”

“Oh, Big Bro. You’ve sure done a great job of pulling the wool over her eyes,” Shigure giggled.

“I understand wanting to laugh, but please don’t make a big deal about this. We don’t want Haruka to suspect anything, right?”

“Oh, of course. That just took me by surprise is all. I’ll just smile and nod.”

Shigure took a deep breath and drained her miso soup. Her expression—which had begun to warp into the dreaded malicious grin she wore at home—immediately returned to the Stepford smile she wore at school.

“Phew,” she sighed. “You’re right. When I first transferred here, he showed a lot of concern for me—both as his desk neighbor and as your little sister. He’s definitely someone I can, uh, always, er... count on?”

Man, she sucks ass at giving compliments.

"See, Hiromichi?" Haruka exclaimed. "I'd be the happiest girl in the world if you two could stay friends."

"Of course," I replied. "That goes without saying."

After all, I was already Shigure's older brother.

Haruka beamed at me, but her expression soon changed to one of unease. "Oh, but... that might make me a little nervous," she said.

"Nervous?" I asked. "Why?"

"I mean, if Shigure finds out how cool and kind you are, she might fall for you, too."

"Hack! Wheeze!"

Agh! The cutlets! The fried breading is totally slicing up my throat! But man, talk about embarrassing! Haruka can be surprisingly sappy when she wants to be! I mean, I am on cloud nine right now. I feel like the luckiest guy alive when I hear her speak of me so fondly. Still, can we leave that for when we're not in front of other people?! I'm positive this little demo—I mean, Shigure—won't be able to keep her mouth shut after all that. Right now, her face is probably—

"O-Ooooooh, I see," Shigure stuttered as she desperately tried to contain her laughter. "That would certainly be, um, quite the, erm... problem?"

She's shaking like crazy! The muscles in her cheeks are clearly twitching! Haruka, you seriously need to stop talking before this girl explodes with laughter!

"N-No, that would never happen!" I squealed. "After all, I'm not really that great or anything! You're just biased when it comes to me, that's all!"

"That's not true at all," Haruka countered. "You're a total gentleman, Hiromichi. That's why I fell for you."

"N-No way. Before you confessed your feelings to me, girls never even looked at me."

"That's only because they have no taste in men. I won't bring up our time together at daycare since it was so long ago, but take last year's cultural festival for example. We weren't even in the same class, or anything, but you offered to help. I'd been lugging around a huge garbage bag during cleanup, and you stepped in and took it off my hands. 'No need to strain yourself,' you'd said. 'This is a man's job.' When I tried to say thanks, you'd already had your back turned to me and gave me a small wave. Talk about incredibly cool and gentlemanly!"

Ho. Lee. Shit. Holy shit! Thanks for calling me 'gentlemanly,' 'cause that just makes me sound cringe as hell! If I heard that story from anyone else, I'd want to hide under a rock for the next millenia. Why was I trying so hard to act cool?! Could I be any more pathetic?

Speaking of which, that girl was Haruka? I had no idea! I was so embarrassed that I'd just spouted all that crap with my back to her the entire time!

"There was also our first date," Haruka continued.

"You're still going?!" I cried. "Hold on! Haruka, please stop this! I'm begging you!"

My cute, merciless girlfriend ignored my pleas. "Hiromichi, you said you're 'not that great.' As your girlfriend, I can't let you talk about yourself that way. So I want you to remember our first date. You walked on the outside of the curb the entire day. When we sat on the benches, you laid out a handkerchief, and when we got tea, you paid for the bill while I was in the restroom. It was so much fun being treated like a princess for the entire day. That was when it occurred to me—when people talk about 'gentlemen,' they must be referring to guys like you, Hiromichi."

For the love of God, somebody please bring an end to this! I was so excited about my first date that I was freaking out about what to do, and I ended up Gaggling "perfect first date manners." Don't expose me like this! I had no other choice! A clueless virgin like me has no choice but to rely on the sage advice he reads online! You're such an airhead that you figured I must be a good guy, but a bully like Shigure will see through the whole thing! She's gonna spit out her drink any second now! I'm sure of it!

I observed Shigure nervously. Even I found this story laughable. To my great surprise, however, not even the slightest hint of a smile had appeared on her usually lax face. Where had all that malice gone?

"You really do like Hiromichi, don't you?" Shigure asked.

"Of course," Haruka confirmed instantly. "If I didn't, I wouldn't have professed my feelings to him. So although I'd like you to be friends with Hiromichi, don't end up falling for him."

"And if I did, what would you do?" Shigure asked.

"Huh?"

"If I fell for Hiromichi, would you step aside for your adorable little sister?"

H-Hey, what is this girl saying?!

What was the point of asking Haruka something that would never happen? I couldn't grasp what Shigure was thinking. However, as soon as I opened my mouth to ask for clarification, Haruka spoke up.

"No. I would never step aside. And I would never forgive you for that."

Her tone was so scathing that the words never ended up leaving my mouth. Haruka was glaring at her sister with intense hostility.

Wh-What's with this sudden tense atmosphere? How did my saga of epic fails turn into this?!

Shigure, unable to bear the painful silence any longer, let out a small laugh. “Aha. You know what they say—laughter is the best medicine. Thanks, Haruka.”

“What?” Haruka asked.

“I’m completely cured. If he can inspire you to look this frightening, there must be more to Hiromichi than meets the eye.”

Shigure’s trademark devilish grin crept onto her face. This side was the side of her I knew all too well.



Haruka's shoulders relaxed. "Jeez, don't startle me like that. Your bad habit of teasing others hasn't changed at all, I see."

"You think?" Shigure asked.

"Yep. You've been a bully since we were kids. You never had any interest in dolls, but as soon as I couldn't handle them anymore because of that horror movie, you immediately started playing with them. And don't even get me started on all the cicadas you brought home, even though you knew I hated them!"

She hasn't matured in the slightest!

Seeing I was unable to commiserate with my girlfriend, I merely glared at our younger sister instead.

"It's in my nature," Shigure quipped, playfully sticking out her tongue. "I just have to tease the people I love."

The bell rang, signaling the end of lunch, and Haruka shot to her feet.

"Oh no!" she cried. "I have gym class next. I need to hurry up and get changed! By the way, Hiromichi..."

"What's up?"

"Drama practice is going to run late today, so you can go home without me. I'll make it up to you plenty this weekend."

"Got it. I look forward to it. Break a leg," I replied.

"Thanks. See you later, Shigure."

"See ya."

Haruka dashed off to her destination, her short skirt flapping with every step. As soon as she was certain her sister was gone, Shigure spoke to me without a hint of mockery into her tone. If anything, she sounded impressed.

"You're truly loved, Big Bro."

"Yeah... Sometimes, it gets a little embarrassing, though."

"But it still makes you happy, right?"

"Of course," I replied. I was beyond happy, in fact.

To think I'd managed to find someone on this massive planet of ours who liked—no, loved—me. I could tell just how much she cherished me, and it was a feeling of satisfaction that I couldn't properly express in words.

"Haruka looks like she's having so much fun," Shigure noted with a sigh. "I want a boyfriend, too."

"Just go out and find one. You're just as beautiful as Haruka. You could have your pick of any guy."

"I want a boyfriend who'll always give in to my selfish demands. One who's loyal, willing to be wrapped around my little finger, and won't get upset when I get mad for no reason. Plus, he needs to be at least 173cm, slender with delicate features, make at least forty million yen a year, have property in Tokyo, and be the perfect gentleman—

that means no drooling over other girls.”

“In your dreams,” I retorted. Such a man didn’t exist, plain and simple. She’d have better luck looking for Sasquatch. “Well, anyway, this is our only shot at being high schoolers. I hope you can find a good guy.”

“I’ve already found a good guy.”

“Huh? Did you just say something?”

“No, nothing at all. More importantly, we should head back—we’ll be late for class.”

“Oh, crap!”

I grabbed Shigure’s cafeteria tray and stood up. Sure, she’d made me sweat a few times and beat the shit out of my poor shin, but she’d helped me big time today. Returning her tray was the least I could do.

Chapter Twelve

Dangerous X Lesson

“I love me some fried chicken!”

I sank my teeth into the breading, which yielded in my mouth with a satisfying crunch. A rush of juices filled my mouth, and the invigorating scent of spices tickled my nostrils. Nothing beat fried chicken fresh out of the oil.

“You’re an amazing chef, you’re attentive, and you’re the second cutest girl in the world,” I remarked. “Yep—you’ll definitely make a great wife, Shigure. As your older brother, I guarantee it! Ahaha!”

I gave my heartfelt praise to the girl sitting across from me. She really was something else. Ever since her arrival, I’d enjoyed one bountiful meal gracing my dinner table after another. I couldn’t thank her enough.

“Um, I just have one question,” Shigure spoke as soon as I tried to convey my feelings.

“Hm? Go ahead.”

“You’re being 50% more disgusting than usual. What’s with the good mood?”

Ahaha, this girl! Ya gotta love her! Making a scathing remark after I showered her with all those compliments. Classic Shigure.

Yet, right now, those spiteful words were music to my ears. Why, you ask?

“I’m going out with Haruka tomorrow,” I explained. “With midterms out of the way, we’ll finally be able to have our first real date in a while. We’ve only been studying together recently, so my excitement is through the roof! Seriously, I am pumped. I don’t think I could hate anyone in this beautiful, wide world right now. Even if someone did something as heinous as drenching my chicken with lemon juice, I could forgive them.”

“Well then, don’t mind if I do,” Shigure replied.

Splash!

“Urgh...” I groaned.

“Well? Can you forgive me?”

“Yep. I forgive you. You’re on thin ice, though—and it’s real close to cracking.”

“You’re surprisingly petty.”

Petty? If this had been any other time, I would’ve opened fire on the spot. My capacity to turn the other cheek was quite impressive, if I did say so myself—I was basically Mother Theresa over here.

I was munching on some soggy, sour chicken and contemplating

my virtuous nature when my cell phone rang. The call was toll-free, and the name displayed on the screen was one I was very familiar with.

“Haruka!” I cried out.

“She’s definitely going to bail on you at the last moment,” Shigure chimed in.

“Don’t jinx me!”

“70% of the time, when a woman bails on you, it means, ‘I’ve given this a lot of thought, and I’ve come to realize that you’re so gross that the idea of being seen with you creeps me out. Never come anywhere near me again, thanks.’”

“No! Even if she is canceling on me, Haruka is different! I’m answering the phone, so be quiet for a minute.”

“Alrighty.”

Once I’d confirmed that Shigure’s cheeks were stuffed full of fried chicken, I walked into the hallway and answered the phone.

“Hello,” I said.

“Good evening, Hiromichi. This is Haruka. Is now a good time?”

“Yeah, it is. I was eating dinner, but I just left the living room.”

“Oh, really? Sorry for the bad timing. Should I call you back later?”

“No, it’s fine as long as we keep it short. What’s up?”

“Okay, I’ll keep this brief. About tomorrow’s date...”

“Er...”

I immediately grew uneasy. Had Shigure predicted the future? Would she seriously bail on me at the last moment?

“So it’s been two months since we started dating, right?” Haruka asked.

“Y-Yeah.”

“During that time, we’ve started calling each other by our first names. It’s still kind of embarrassing, but we’re also holding hands when we walk around. And at my house the other day, things started to h-heat up a little, right? I-I think the two of us are doing really well...”

“I-I agree...”

“Y-You mentioned something about our future before, right? If we were able to hold hands after only one month, we’d probably get along well for the rest of our lives?”

“Y-Yeah, I did say that...”

Just thinking back on it made me cringe. Why had I ever uttered the words “for the rest of our lives” as a high schooler?

D-Don’t tell me...

Haruka had laughed the comment aside at that time, but had Shigure been right? Had I actually managed to creep my girlfriend

out? As I recalled Shigure's recent comments, a chill ran down my spine.

"That... made me really happy," Haruka continued. "It made me understand just how much you wanted to be with me, so I realized that I needed to make more of an effort."

"Make more of an effort"? To do what?"

"To take our next big step as a couple."

"BIG STEB?!"

"Eep! I-I just wanted to tell you that today! If I didn't just bite the bullet and call you, I would've lost the courage to voice my thoughts! W-Well, I'll be waiting at the station tomorrow at noon! Goodnight!"

Haruka must've gotten embarrassed by my strange outburst. She quickly fired off an answer—as if running away—and hung up the phone. The receiver beeped several times, indicating that the call had ended, but it remained plastered to my ear. I stood stock still, Haruka's words repeating in my head over and over again like a broken record. She'd been very clear in expressing herself—there'd been no room to misunderstand or dodge the issue.

My brain processed her words at the speed of dial-up internet. Once I'd finally managed to decipher them, I fell into a manic state of happiness, surprise, and excitement.

"Sh-Shigure! Shigure, Shigure, Shigure!" I cried, racing into the living room to seek salvation.

"Yes, yes. I'm here, I'm here," Shigure replied. "There aren't four of me, though."

"I just got off the phone with Haruka. Apparently, she wants to take the next b-big step as a couple tomorrow! That's what she just said!"

"Oh! I mean... wow. Isn't that nice?" Shigure's eyes had widened for a split second, but her expression quickly returned to one of disinterest. "So you want to gush about Haruka while we eat fried chicken? Not exactly the most appetizing thing to talk about during dinner."

"No! Since we held hands just recently, the next step has got to be... th-that, right?! H-Hugging each other?!"

"When it comes to matters of love, you really do think small, Big Bro."

What? No hug?!

"But if not that, then what in the world...?" I trailed off.

"At your stage, the 'next step' usually refers to a kiss, right?"

"K-Kiss?! A g-girl? With my l-lips?"

Are you kidding me?! Wait, it's normal for couples to kiss, right? I mean, I've even felt the opportunity arise a few times before, but still! You're telling me we're going to slide all the way to first base

tomorrow?! In less than 24 hours, Haruka's pouty lips are going to press against my—no, it's too much!

"Oh shit, my heart's racing!" I cried. "H-Hey, Shigure! What's the right way to kiss someone? I've never done this before! Is there any sort of etiquette you have to follow no matter what?! Is there anything that girls hate?! You're good at this stuff, right?! Teach me everything you know!"

Shigure glared at me reproachfully. "And just who do you think I am?"

I figured that Shigure had ample experience in that department, but that didn't seem to be the case.

Her expression changed into her trademark malicious grin, and the depths of her narrow eyes glistened with a sadistic light. That was when I knew—the next time she'd open her mouth, it would be to utter something horrible.

"Still... if you're feeling so uneasy, why don't you spend the rest of the night practicing?" she suggested.

"Huh? Practice what? Kissing?"

"Exactly. Look, you have the perfect training partner right here. I'm your precious girlfriend's twin sister. We have the same face, body, voice, and even scent."

"Wha—?!"

"Why use me as your little Haruka guinea pig? That way, you won't make a fool of yourself tomorrow."

See! I knew it'd be something awful! This girl never stops running her mouth!

"Don't be stupid!" I shouted. "I could never do something like that!"

"I don't mind at all, though."

"You should, though! As a girl, you shouldn't even make jokes like that!"

"Heh. You're such a nice guy, Big Bro. No, not nice—soft. If you keep that up, your relationship with Haruka won't last much longer," she warned in a chilling tone.

What?

I looked back at her, but she wasn't wearing her usual impish grin. No, this was the cruel smirk of someone looking down on an insect.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"I meant exactly what I said. Haruka's going to break up with you soon."

"H-How can you be so sure?"

"Because I know it for a fact. Any girl would get sick of you being so passive. You should try to be more like, let's see... Aizawa, the guy

from our class. You'd do well to his type of kindness."

"Huh?! That guy?!" I shouted without thinking.

I hadn't been able to stop myself, though. I mean, she was speaking about the Akira Aizawa—a fellow student in junior-year AP and a notorious playboy. At school, he and his little posse would roar with laughter about the girls he'd humped and dumped. Naturally, his shallow nature meant that he had a poor reputation among the female students, as well. Regardless of whether or not I was "soft," being compared to a guy like him had coaxed an odd yell from my throat.

"Isn't he the lowest of the low?" I asked. "He fools around with one girl after another! How many girls do you think he's made cry in our class alone?!"

"But girls like him, right?" Shigure prodded. "So much so that he's never alone on the weekends."

"Ugh. That's because they think he's hot, right?"

"He might be stylish, but he's nothing to write home about. In terms of looks, he's not that much different from you."

Honestly, I'd noticed the same thing. I guess we were both equally lackluster according to Shigure, but if we compared him to someone like Tomoe, the difference was like night and day. Their facial features and other minute traits differed on a fundamental level. So yeah, with all that being said, I'd often wondered why this guy did so well with women despite being nothing special. Since Shigure had pointed out my very own misgivings, I couldn't argue with her.

When I fell silent, she continued. "Women often claim to like 'nice guys,' right? Losers like you tend to take that at face value, but that's a serious misunderstanding. Women are always speaking subjectively. In this case, they're not talking about kindness in the general sense. No, women want a man who's kind to them—their girlfriend. In other words, they want a man who suits their convenience. Sure, Aizawa's a scumbag who might be about as far from the general definition of 'nice' as you can get, but at least he keeps the girl happy while they're together. After all, he never leaves them confused."

"Confused?"

"Does he truly like me? How flirtatious can I be without coming on too strong? Should I have tried getting closer to him today? Did... Did he stop liking me today? When you're trying to win someone's heart over, there's a lot to think about. And thinking is absolutely exhausting."

Oh...

"Guys like Aizawa don't let girls feel that sort of uncertainty," Shigure continued. "Instead, he takes action without giving them time to think. He skips over all the annoyances by providing nothing but

the joy of romance. Sure, the world might call that ‘shallow,’ but it must seem very kind from the girl’s perspective, right? Aizawa is a far ‘nicer’ guy than you. Listen: making Haruka back herself into a corner on the phone isn’t kindness.”

“Guh!”

I had no words—not a single rebuttal. Shigure had convinced me: my commonsense definition of “kindness toward women” had been fundamentally wrong. No, even if it hadn’t been wrong, applying it to my girlfriend as if it were a universal definition had been a mistake. After all, I’d forced Haruka to make that phone call.

“Well, what’s done is done. More importantly, what are you going to do from here on out? Make Haruka kiss you? Will you wait for her to agonize over every word until she finds some excuse to approach you? Or will you finally muster up the courage to take the first step this time?”

“O-Of course, I’ll be the one to—”

“Aha!”

...take the first step.

When I’d tried to say those words, Shigure cut me off with her derisive laughter. “You could never do something so bold!”

“Wha—?!”

“Oh, my spineless beta of an older brother. If you can’t even make a move on a stand-in like me, how will you ever have the balls to kiss your precious girlfriend? You’re clearly going to find some convenient excuse to chicken out and say something like, ‘Well, Haruka’s feelings are more important than mine.’ You understand that more than anyone, don’t you? That’s just the sort of person you are. No matter how much I ridicule you, your inability to retaliate is proof of that.”

“Urgh.”

Why?

“What’s the matter?” Shigure asked in a mocking tone. “You can practice with me before kissing the real deal. Look—these lips have done nothing but piss you off for the past half hour. Go ahead and shut them up. I’m giving you permission to do it myself. What, too scared?”

Why is she taking this so far?

“See, you can’t do anything,” she continued. “Talk about pathetic. You’re nothing but slime. Just a puny, sexless blob of slime! I was right—you and Haruka won’t last much longer. Well, that works out just fine for me. The sooner you break up, the sooner I won’t have to hide our living situation any longer. While we’re at it, why don’t I just steal you away from Haruka? Honestly, I actually like you being a worthless loser.”

Shigure's condescending eyes, derisive laughter, and scorn—which slipped off her tongue as smoothly as a song—caused my blood to boil. For the first time in my life, I understood just how pointed that expression was.

"I've had enough of this shit!" I cried.

Driven by my impulses, I acted in a way that usually would have been unthinkable. I grabbed her arms and pressed them against the tatami mat as I wrestled her to the floor. I loomed over her, pressing myself down against her with my weight. Through brute strength, I'd pinned her to the ground. Shigure's body stiffened, and her eyes were practically popping out of their sockets. In all likelihood, she'd never expected me to respond to her provocation.

When had I last gotten so rough with a girl? Elementary school? Kindergarten? I couldn't even remember. Perhaps this was the first time in my life I'd done so. In any case, my blood boiled hot enough for me to choose violence, and it was exactly that reckless anger that made me uncertain of what I'd do, what I was capable of.

And yet...

"Ah!"

I could feel Shigure trying to push back against me, but her resistance felt so meager. Hadn't she claimed to have some kind of martial arts experience? Or perhaps her strength was futile—no matter how much she'd trained, she couldn't push off a man looming over her. Her wrists, dainty and thin, fit snugly into my hands; her arms seemed so much weaker than a man's. As I stared at her delicate skin, I realized I could whatever I pleased with this frail creature—the mirror image of my girlfriend. Ice coursed through my red-hot veins, cooling me down, and a chill ran down my spine. I panicked at the resistance I felt against my hands. I let go, shot to my feet, and cried out, "I-I'm sorry!"

Shigure smiled innocently. "See, you can do it if you try."

"Huh?!"

"Well, you get points taken off for being so forceful, but it's better than nothing."

"What are you talking about?"

"Remember what you just said? 'Is there anything that girls hate?! Teach me everything you know!' Listen carefully: you value women too highly. No, that's not right. Rather than valuing them too highly, it'd be better to say you're too scared of them. But if you walk around with your tail tucked between your legs every time you're with her, Haruka will start to grow timid, as well. You need to show more emotion. Don't hide your feelings while expecting Haruka to reveal hers. In some cases, your passion might surprise or frighten her... but if your actions are rooted in love, she'll forgive you.

Haruka's a good girl."

"Erm..."

"Well then, that concludes Professor Shigure's lecture on women. Now hurry up and eat. I want to clear the dishes away."

Oh, I think I get it now.

Shigure could easily discern the difference between "just playing around" and "fighting." So why had she crossed that line now, of all times, and prodded until I'd lost my cool? Perhaps she'd wanted to provide the unique experience of pouring my heart out to a girl. What's more, it definitely hadn't been for my benefit—no, it had been for Haruka's.

"You know, you're actually pretty nice," I said.

"Oh, you just realized that now? You're a horrible judge of character."

It all seemed so obvious now. Shigure had probably been mad at me—her brother—for forcing her sister into making that call. I'd been prancing around like some ecstatic, love-sick baboon over Haruka's words, but I'd essentially forced her into being the one to call the shots in our relationship. How long had she fretted over making that call? And once she'd actually done so, how nervous had I made her feel? When I considered her circumstances, my ecstasy quickly turned to self loathing, and I felt the strong desire to punch myself.

I'm positive that Shigure felt the same way about me, so I made a promise to her.

"Listen, Shigure—I'm definitely going to kiss Haruka tomorrow. And of course, I'm going to initiate it. She might reject me, but I'll be the one to do it no matter what. After all, Haruka was the one to confess her feelings to me! If I don't do this much, I won't be setting a good example as a man."

"Well, give it your best shot, I suppose."

"Yeah. You bet."

Chapter Thirteen

Gloomy X Weekend

“Well then, I’m heading out,” Hiromichi said.

“Okay,” I replied. “Good luck on the battlefield of love, Big Bro.”

“Yeah...”

Hiromichi nodded in a somewhat embarrassed fashion and left the apartment. I watched him leave, waving all the while, until the door closed behind him. He seemed tired, no doubt because of yesterday’s call with Haruka. In fact, the nerves had made him toss and turn for most of the night—I hadn’t heard him snoring until 3:00AM.

“Okay, what next?”

I needed to prepare a meal for Hiromichi, so I stepped into the kitchen. Since he was planning to have lunch with Haruka, he’d probably return home for dinner. His wallet couldn’t endure the strain of eating out twice in a row. I’d be making a vegetable stir fry tonight. Seeing as the dish wouldn’t have any meat, I would use a Chinese seasoning paste to add the oiliness.

“Yawn...”

Oops. I can’t start yawning while I’m cooking with fire.

Honestly, I was a little tired myself—I mean, I knew that Hiromichi hadn’t fallen asleep until the early morning, after all. Our quarrel last night had shaken us both up. I realized I’d said too much, but there was a reason for my harsh words: Hiromichi’s knack for screwing things up had left Haruka backed into a corner. I’d pushed and prodded instead of backing down when I usually would have and ended up severely wounding his pride as a result. At least it had served as his much-needed motivation.

Last night, I’d already mentally prepared all the countermeasures and moves for when he would inevitably strike me or pin me down. Despite my frail, feminine appearance, I had trained in martial arts. It went without saying that I could hold my own in a fight.

And yet...

To my great surprise, I hadn’t been able to struggle when Hiromichi had pinned me down. I hadn’t been paralyzed with fear or anything like that—it was my own feelings that had rendered me immobile. It was like something had awakened inside of me, and I wasn’t able to ignore them any longer. As I laid there, unable to move, I’d expected something. If I don’t resist right now, how far will he go? I’d wondered.

“Hmm...”

I'd been aware of my slight affection for my stepbrother for a while. There wasn't any specific reason or anything, but I could remember when it had started. When we'd first met, I'd admonished him for trying to "get off easy." As a result, he'd tried his hardest to accomodate me as his new little sister. He'd struggled to call me by name, his face as stiff as a corpse. The pleasant warmth I'd felt at that time had probably sparked my initial feelings for him.

Every time I pressed his buttons, he would strive—despite his timidity—to accept me with open arms, just like a brother would. I found him so precious and adorable that it filled me with joy.

Although we called each other siblings, we had only met a month ago. At this point, I couldn't view Hiromichi as an actual brother—this was different from what I'd feel toward a blood relative.

Us twins really can be terrifying, can't we?

It was a given that we looked the same, but we were identical in small details, as well—down to our hairstyles, choice of shampoo, and taste in men.

That being said, these feelings would never blossom into romance; that much was obvious. Not only was Hiromichi my stepbrother, but he was also dating my biological sister. We'd simply gotten carried away yesterday, sucked in by the atmosphere and our youthful curiosity. Yes, that was it.

"Could I be feeling sexually frustrated?" I mumbled to myself. In such a cramped living space, there were... certain things a person couldn't do. I needed to watch out for that.

I'm probably worrying over nothing.

If Hiromichi had gone any further yesterday, I would have—without a shadow of a doubt—come back to my senses and fought back.

Besides, I despise love, romance, or whatever you want to call it.

Yes, really. I loathed all things that I deemed ridiculous, and love was one of them. It caused people to lose sight of themselves, running around blindly like chickens with their heads cut off. Even worse, it often led to trouble for those around them. No, nothing good ever came from it. Others were free to act like dogs in heat if they wanted to, but I had no intention of taking part. The last thing I wanted was to be the lead role in such an inane soap opera.

As it stood, Hiromichi and I were in the perfect relationship—he acted like the perfect older brother when we were in this apartment, listening and attending to all my selfish requests. Things were fine the way they were.

Still...

"Unfortunately, it looks like I've gotten myself wrapped up in this inane soap opera," I muttered to myself as I plated the stirfry.

There was just one—admittedly major—problem: my sister. Due to a coincidence of astronomical proportions, I'd begun living with Haruka's boyfriend. Any way you sliced it, this was a difficult situation. We couldn't let this secret come to light while Hiromichi and I still lived alone, but it would still be a major bombshell to drop once our parents returned in a year. Either way, I knew Haruka wouldn't be able to remain calm—not after finding out that her boyfriend lives with her identical twin.

If we viewed this as the inane soap opera it really was, it was obvious that our living situation would cause major conflict. Haruka was the star, after all, and I was just the stagehand—an outsider who'd gotten swept up in the revelries of romance. As such, it was my responsibility to set the scene. I wouldn't have lifted a finger if this had happened to a complete stranger, but Haruka was my sister. I would lend a helping hand for her, though I wouldn't overextend myself.

I'd loved my long-lost sister ever since we were kids.

As kids, she'd always complained—verging on the brink of tears—whenever I'd received the larger slice of cake or trounced her at a game. Sure, she'd been a handful, but whenever I'd given up my slice of cake or artfully lost on purpose, she wore the most sincere, innocent smile. Seeing that always made me far happier than winning first place or enjoying more dessert.

Yes, more than anything, I'd always loved seeing Haruka's joyful face. That hadn't changed, and as someone who cared deeply for her sister, what could I do in this situation?

“Well then...”

Truth be told, there was a foolproof solution for this strange relationship, including the unease it would spawn. Hiromichi—being the dunce that he was—hadn't realized it, but the problems arising from our living situation could be solved in one fell swoop. And, to make things even better, it could be done as quickly as tomorrow, not in a year.

How, you might ask? It was simple enough.

I arranged the rice, stir fry, soup, and cutlery on the tea table, covered the meal, and left a note beside it. It read, “I'll be home late tonight. Have dinner without me.”

With all that out of the way, I took out my phone and selected a contact. “Hello, is this Aizawa?” I asked.

X X X

I waited in front of the clock by the train station, which indicated

it was 2:00PM. Aizawa showed up right on time.

“Yo, Shigure!” he called out. “You’re a sight for sore eyes.”

“Hello, Aizawa. Sorry for the sudden invitation—you weren’t busy, were you?”

“Nah, not at all. I mean, I’m the one who’s always asking you out, right?”

It was true—ever since I’d transferred, he’d asked me out practically every day. Akira Aizawa—the pre-eminent fuckboy of Seiun’s AP classes—grinned, showing off his pearly whites. His slim silhouette, along with the refreshing color palette of his clothes, gave off a cool vibe. He sported rougher attire compared to his usual blazer, dressed in a white graphic tee and skinny jeans. And, to tie the whole ensemble together, he wore a number of accessories around his wrists and neck, carefully selecting just enough pieces to not come across as gaudy.

In any case, he couldn’t have been more different from Hiromichi, who thought a collared shirt paired with checkered patterns was peak fashion. In fact, I doubt my poor, passé step brother even owned a bracelet.

Incidentally, I’d also put more thought into my outfit than usual. I’d gone with a traditional, feminine outfit that I thought would be the best match for my school persona. More importantly, though, I was confident that it would be a hit with the guys. I generally never wore this pink, flowy dress because it was a pain to wash. I’d also matched it with a casual jacket that was light enough to wear during summer and strapped, high-heeled sandals which exposed my feet. To top it all off, I’d applied a thin layer of gel polish to my nails and a bit of makeup.

That being said, everyone knew Aizawa was a player who liked to speed run getting girls into the sack. As long as you had two X chromosomes, you were fair game. Clothes hardly mattered to him. But still, it wasn’t like I could’ve shown up in a tracksuit. This was a date, after all.

“But seriously, I’m over the moon,” Aizawa added. “I never expected you to call me.”

“Well, you were just so enthusiastic and persistent about it. I thought this might be fun now that our midterms are out of the way. Good thing you were free.”

“Anywhere you wanna go? If not, I’ll be your guide. I know this town like the back of my hand.”

“I’ll leave it to you, then. After all, I’m pretty new here.”

“Nice! Let’s go grab some bubble tea! I know a good place nearby.”

Aizawa grabbed my hand and started walking, casual as could be.

It couldn't have felt more natural. He was clearly experienced with this sort of thing after plenty of practice. The two of us couldn't have been any different from Hiromichi and Haruka, who had taken an entire month to hold hands.

And so I found myself on a date with Aizawa. It wasn't because I had any interest in him—no, he was simply an instant solution to the enormous problem between me, my brother, and my sister. The short and sweet of it was that I planned on getting into a relationship.

Having a boyfriend would soften the impact of our living situation. Even if Haruka were to find out about me and Hiromichi tomorrow, my "relationship" would lessen the blow overall. Neither of my sibling relationships would fracture over something as ridiculous as romance.

I'd chosen Aizawa because I felt no guilt over using him. Yes, even I had a conscience and lines which I wouldn't cross. If, for example, I started dating someone like Mr. Muscles—another guy I didn't have even the slightest romantic inclination for—I'd be plagued by chest pains.

Additionally, a relationship based on false emotions could collapse at any moment, although I needed this one to last for at least an entire year. I was certain that if I put out for Aizawa, he would go along with my lie. I had no intention of criticizing his playboy ways, so we could maintain this relationship through force of habit. There wasn't a more convenient man around for my circumstances.

That's why I was confident that this had to be the most amicable solution for all of us, even me—caught in the middle as I was.

"The owner here is goats," Aizawa said. "He'll give you extra tapioca pearls for free."

"I wasn't aware that boys liked bubble tea."

"Yeah, I love this shit. Drink it for at least one meal every day."

We swapped friendly banter that required little-to-no brain power and placed our orders. I bought a matcha latte, and Aizawa ordered milk tea. We grabbed our drinks and went outside, where girls usually liked to sit. Not a bad decision.

Too bad I hate bubble tea.

Well, no, that wasn't quite it—I didn't necessarily dislike bubble tea; I just hated the business model. Seeing as I came from a poor household, eating anything with an extremely low cost-benefit ratio set my teeth on edge.

"Still, it's nice to see you in casual clothes," Aizawa remarked. "The rich girl look suits a traditional gal like you."

"Aha, you think too highly of me. I might come across as a delicate maiden, but I'm actually quite a bully."

"Oh shit, you can bully me anytime! That bracelet's pretty cute,

too. Did you pay a lot for it?”

“This old thing? I bought it at a random street stall.”

“Seriously? You must be one hell of a treasure hunter. Next time I go shopping, you gotta come help me pick out my drip.”

“Speaking of which, that’s a pretty interesting necklace. Is that a bolt?”

“Yeah, it’s the screw for my head. It fell out the other day, so I put it on a necklace for safe keeping. If I hadn’t lost the damn thing, I could’ve scored better on the midterms.”

“Oh my God!” I laughed. “You’re too funny!”

Aizawa and I made small talk about my casual clothes. That was a smart move on his part. Seeing as we both attended the same school, we could have discussed our classes and so forth, but that would’ve been a poor choice for a date. After all, commiserating about school might have been fun, but it didn’t make a person happy. On the other hand, being complimented on your looks did.

Although the two emotions—enjoyment and happiness—might have felt similar, they were completely different. The former often led to friendship, while the latter had the potential to lead to romance. If a guy didn’t understand these fundamental differences and pursued nothing but enjoyment, he would end up perpetually stuck in the friend zone. Sure, he and his love interest might open up to one another, but the gap between them would never shrink.

Of course, this pick-up artist understood the nature of emotions all too well. We spoke alone for about 20 minutes, chatting about this and that. Somehow, he never managed to wear me out—no doubt because he often inserted humor into the conversation,

“Huh? Is that you, Ai? Getting bubble tea with another girl?” a feminine voice called out.

“You’re gonna get fat,” another girl chimed in. “That stuff’s liquified fast food.”

A group of two guys and two girls approached our table. At a glance, they appeared to be huge EDM fans—well, that was my initial impression, at least. As they chatted with Aizawa, they also stole glimpses of me.

“Looks like our little Ai’s brought another date here,” one of the girls noted.

“Seriously? He sure goes through ’em quick, doesn’t he?” one guy said.

“I can’t tell if chicks love him or hate him,” the other guy added with a laugh.

“What are you assholes even doing here? And Mio, don’t call her another date,” Aizawa retorted.

“Are these your friends, Aizawa?” I asked.

“Sorry about this, Shigure,” he replied. “Looks like we’ve run into a group of real dickheads. These are my friends from middle school. All of them were too stupid to get into Seiun, so feel free to point and laugh.”

“Wow, rude!” one of the girls cried.

“Your name’s Shigure, right?” the other asked. “Did you hear what he just said? If I were you, I wouldn’t touch this jerk with a ten-foot pole!”

“Oh c’mon. Will all of you just shut the hell up?” Aizawa groaned.

Aizawa tried to run them off with a troubled expression, but the group refused to budge. They were acting like Christmas had come early or something.

Eventually, Aizawa appeared to give up. “Well, since it’s come to this, why don’t the six of us hang out together?” he suggested.

Seeing as I didn’t feel all that strongly about spending one-on-one time with Aizawa, I agreed. The group made plans in the blink of an eye, and I found myself getting whisked away to a bowling alley at a nearby recreational facility.

“Wow, another strike!” one of the girls shouted. “You’re so good at this, Shigure!”

“High-five! Give me some skin!” the other cheered.

“Your form is beautiful,” one of the guys noted. “Do you play sports or something? You’re not built like your average chick.”

“I did full-contact karate from third grade until I moved here a little while ago,” I replied.

“Martial arts?! Damn, I never would’ve guessed! You look like one of those fancy, upper-class types!”

“She’d probably kick your ass, Ai!” his friend said with a laugh.

“Nah, I doubt that,” Aizawa scoffed. “Have you seen how shredded my abs are?”

“Those are just for show, dude. Sure, you work out, but you haven’t played a day of sports in your life. There’s no way in hell you could beat someone with real fighting experience.”

With the whole gang together, the excitement level rose to a fervor. The group celebrated every little damn thing. Whenever someone landed a strike, we might as well have been at a festival. It was exhausting. I couldn’t understand what they found so exhilarating. I mean, there were only a few events in life worth jumping for joy over, right? To make matters worse, the group seemed to disregard my bewilderment and insisted on placing me in the center of the hubbub.

The two girls relentlessly clung to me, trying to engage me in various topics. Meanwhile, the two guys stood off at a slight distance,

acting like frenzied apes with their unnecessary overreactions. Aizawa—who no doubt assumed that I must have felt uneasy being in a group of total strangers—sidled up to me and chivalrously protected me from the overbearing group.

This perfect formation must have been plotted beforehand.

Meeting Aizawa's friends at the café hadn't been a coincidence—no, he'd undoubtedly invited them from the very beginning. Or perhaps the five of them had agreed to hang out today, and my presence had changed their plans. One thing was for certain, though: if Aizawa had plotted this from the beginning, he could become the top host of any club in Japan.

Dates were generally a one-on-one affair. A lot of men failed to see past this fixed idea, but women thought differently. For them, the breadth of her partner's social circle was even more important than his looks. Aizawa knew this and wanted to show off a world that revolved around him.

"Look at how fun everything is with me," he seemed to be saying, as if offering something entirely out of the ordinary.

Since I thought nothing of him, his grandstanding had no effect on me. However, for women who did like him—in other words, those who willingly approached the school's most notorious playboy, longing for adventure—Aizawa must have seemed like a knight in shining armor, someone who would whisk them away from their boring, hum-drum routine.

I couldn't recall his ranking during midterms, but he was in Seiun's junior-year AP class. He would probably get into a decent college. If he started working at a trading company, he would likely become a capable businessman.

"Hmm..."

While I contemplated Aizawa's incredible shrewdness, I came to find him...

Absolutely repulsive.

Of course, that wasn't his fault. Just as I'd expected, he was "kind" to women. For my purposes, there couldn't have been a more convenient man. I had no complaints there.

That being said, I'd seen this method once before—about 10 years ago, in fact. I couldn't stop myself from remembering my mother's secret lover, the man who had torn my family apart.

X X X

My biological father was 10 years older than my mother. While my mother was a swimsuit model-turned-actress, my father was an

editor at a mid-sized publishing company. Although I wasn't aware of where my parents had met, I knew they'd gotten engaged while my mother was 22 and my father was 32. After they'd gotten married, my mother had quit her job to give birth to me and my sister.

The family portrait within my memory was a joyful, harmonious one. At that time, I'd never doubted the permanence of that depiction. However, when I reflected back on it, I realized that my parents' marriage had always been imbalanced.

When Haruka and I had become aware of our surroundings, our mother had still maintained her radiant youth and beauty. As young children, she had been our pride and joy—hearing how much we resembled her had always made us happy. Our father, on the other hand, wasn't very handsome. As a desk worker, he'd quickly let himself go, receding hairline and all. I think it was the hair loss that acted as the straw that broke the camel's back, as it seemed to bother him as well. In comparison to our perpetually beautiful mother, he'd probably developed an inferiority complex.

Perhaps in an attempt to compensate through money, he'd become a workaholic. He hadn't just come home late—more and more often, he'd stay at work overnight.

Haruka and I repeatedly asked when our father would be returning, only to be met with the same response each time.

"Your father has a lot on his plate right now," our mother had always replied. "He's working very hard for us."

I'd retained strong memories of these dinner table exchanges due to the frequency of my father's absence. And the less we saw of him, the more another man—Takashi Takao—began to visit.

"Oh, so your names are Haruka and Shigure," he'd said when we'd first met. "The two of you are just as beautiful as your mom."

Takashi Takao still regularly appeared in TV dramas, but we'd met him when he was barely 19 or 20 years old. We'd been introduced at a barbeque held by one of our mother's friends from her acting days. It had been another weekend without my father, so my mother had decided to take us to the party.

The man possessed androgynous features, well-maintained skin, and a mop-top hairstyle streaked with red highlights. Everything about him—from his flawless skin and nails to his fashionable piercings—gave off a dainty, gentle impression. I vividly remembered my first impression being, "How can a man be so beautiful?"

Haruka had taken an immediate liking to Takao, but I hadn't from the get-go. My opinion of him never changed, either. Even as a child, I'd felt uneasy about his relationship with our mother.

When Takao began staying at our house for long periods of time, that uneasiness had only grown. Our mother, who had loved and

doted on us so much until then, would ignore us whenever she spent time with him.

Of course, these audacious, secret meetings hadn't lasted very long. Our father had uncovered our mother's infidelity in no time at all. Despite the fact, I could barely remember them arguing over it. Perhaps our father had felt so guilty that he hadn't been able to muster any anger toward our mother. At that time, if our father had shown his emotions—perhaps even if he'd rebuked her through violence—things might have turned out differently. Hadn't our mother continued the trysts—without even a single attempt to hide them—because she'd expected that passive reaction?

Now that I was older and more mature, I had a whole slew of thoughts on the matter. I had no way of confirming anything, though, as it was all in the past.

At any rate, our parents had gotten a divorce. Our family—which I'd naively believed to be permanent—had broken apart. Haruka and I had started living in separate households. I stayed with our mother, and she with our father.

Naturally, our mother had run to Takao for support, but—as you might expect from a man who had seduced a wife with two kids—he wasn't exactly the greatest human being. "This whole thing was fresh and exciting when it was an affair. Now that you're divorced, you're just a middle-aged hag with two kids. You really think I'd stay with you?" he'd spat at her.

My mother had spent days drowning in her own tears, but I couldn't bring myself to pity her. After destroying our family, ripping me apart from my sister, and thoroughly manipulating everyone around you, this is what you've come to? I'd thought coldly. How foolish she'd been.

Since then, I hadn't clung to fantasies of love and romance that had been so typical among girls of my age. That still hadn't changed, and I had no intention of doing so in the future. After all, I'd hate to become the star of that inane soap opera, remember?

X X X

"Man, that was fun," one of Aizawa's friends exclaimed.

"But wow, Shigure won by one hell of a lead," the other noted.

"I'm dying here. Never thought I'd lose at bowling," Aizawa lamented with a sigh.

"Aha. And you're usually so good at co-ed sports, Ai. Only co-ed sports, though."

We walked along a pedestrian bridge that led to the train station

and reminisced about our recent bowling experience. It was already 7:00PM. Because we were quickly approaching the summer solstice, the tail-end of the lengthening days still burned crimson in the darkness. Before long, night would fall in earnest.

Naturally, this crowd wasn't the type to disperse just because it was getting late, so the conversation turned to plans for the evening.

"Hey, what should we do now?" one of the girls asked.

A boy who'd arrived later than me chimed in by mimicking throwing back a drink. "Do you even have to ask? What else is there to do on a Saturday night?"

"Get turnt!" everyone cried in unison.

Obviously, they weren't talking about getting jacked up on bubble tea, and I didn't exactly feel like tagging along. It probably came as no big surprise, but I'd never had a drop of alcohol in my life. I had no idea how it would affect me, and I wasn't willing to find out in front of strangers.

"Then let's stop by the convenience store and head over to Masa's place," Aizawa suggested. "You coming with us, Shigure?"

It went without saying that this group had been hunting down some sort of prey like me, so I just didn't want to let my guard down. There was no doubt they were planning to drag me into their little circle, get me drunk, and have their way with me. That was probably the fastest way of "conquering" a young girl with shyness befitting her age.

But in this particular case, I'd come here with that plan in mind, and it was time to pull it off. I'd "interacted" with Aizawa enough to justify liking him, so there was no reason to needlessly kill my brain cells. I'd pull him away from the rest of the group and seduce him. It was a win-win situation, since it shortened the meaningless process on his end, as well. He would have no reason to refuse.

"Listen," I said, turning to face Aizawa. I was about to continue when I noticed something in the park below us and froze up. "Huh...?"

My field of vision lurched, as though struck by lightning, and my heart pounded so strongly inside my chest that I feared it might burst out. Sweat erupted from every pore, much like after stepping into a sauna. Yet, at the same time, the core of my body froze, and I was assaulted in chills.

I feel... sick...

I unthinkingly clamped a hand over my mouth as my organs revolted inside my body. Something far, far denser than gastric fluids boiled at the bottom of my stomach. Whatever it was, it threatened to spew from my mouth at any given moment.

Why... huh? Why am I... over something like... this...

"Huh? What's wrong? Hey Shigure, you're coming with us, right?"

We're buddies now, aren't we?" Aizawa asked.

"Urgh..." I groaned.

"Shigure? What are you staring at?"

"Sorry, but I seem to be feeling a little under the weather. I'm gonna go home," I apologized.

"No way!" one of the girls protested. "You looked fine just a minute ago, cutie!"

"Yeah!" one of the guys agreed. "You're our MVP! You can't just bail on us!"

"Don't worry—we're not busting out any of the hard stuff."

"Exactly. The night's just getting started!"

"Hey, cut that shit out," Aizawa rebuked his friends. "You do look pretty pale, so I won't force you to come with us. Still, it'll be a pain in the ass to ride the train if you're feeling that crappy. I know a good place to rest around here—c'mon, let's go."

Aizawa wrapped an arm around my shoulders. In other words, if things didn't go according to plan, he'd get forceful.

I had no interest in love or romance. I found them to be the most absurd, abhorrent things in this world. So naturally, I wasn't too fixated on my virginity either. Someday, I would lose it to no one in particular. Whoever that ended up being wasn't much of an issue. Even the most ill-reputable sort of playboy would do... At least, that's what I had always thought.

For some reason, though, right now...

Everything about him disgusted me, from his breath on my hair and his hand on my shoulder, to his vulgar desires directed at my body. Everything.

"Well then, let's go," Aizawa repeated. "Don't worry. I'll take good care of you."

"I said... I'm going... home," I murmured.

"What was that? I couldn't hear you," he asked, his grip around my shoulder tightening. I felt his nails digging into my skin. "You're not getting away," the gesture asserted.

At that moment, my body moved of its own accord. I crouched to free myself from Aizawa's grip and spun sideways. My horizontal kick skimmed the ground and swept Aizawa's legs out from under him. As he fell backward, I lifted my knee and raised my foot up in the air. Once he'd made contact with the ground—looking dumbfoundedly up at the sky—I brought my foot down a hair's width away from his face. The heel of my sandle buckled and broke off, unable to withstand the sudden force.

"I said I'm going home!" I shouted at him.

No one from the group chased after me.

The air around the group had frozen over, consumed by Shigure's scream. As she fled, her back becoming a pinprick in the distance, it finally began to thaw. Office workers and cram school students—the latter of which were attending seminars in front of the station—were starting their journeys back home. Amidst this hubbub, Aizawa's friends gathered around his fallen body.

"H-Hey, you still with us, Ai?" one asked.

"That was legit scary. What's with her, suddenly blowing a fuse like that? Totally unladylike."

"What should we do, Aizawa? Chase after her?"

"Huh? You wanna kidnap her?"

In response to these comments, Aizawa shook his head. "Nah, it's fine. We weren't really hitting it off, even from day one. Also..."

"Also?"

"I think... I just came a little."

"What the hell, man?!" everyone shouted in unison.

Chapter Fourteen

First Love X Catastrophe

Since we were children, I'd always loved Haruka's sincere, innocent smile. Whenever I would give her the larger slice of cake or let her win, her expression had always made me far happier than winning first place or enjoying more dessert.

I'd come up with a splendid idea: I'd find a boyfriend in hopes of preserving that smile. I could lessen Haruka's shock about our living situation by doing so, and the relationships we'd built thus far wouldn't be threatened any more than necessary. My bonds with both Hiromichi and Haruka were important to me, and the thought of hurting either of them irrevocably over romance—a fleeting distraction—was absurd.

What other decision could I have made? Yes, I felt sorry for my prospective “boyfriend,” who would be used by a woman like me—someone who knew nothing of love. That was exactly why I'd chosen someone I could deceive with a clear conscience, someone with whom I could maintain a solely physical relationship. After all, I'd planned to properly reward whoever I chose.

We would all walk away happy and unharmed. There was no better way to resolve this situation amicably. This was the best thing that I—and I alone—could do for them.

I'm well aware of all that, but still...

When I'd seen Hiromichi and Haruka kissing in front of the park, everything inside me had screamed to abort the plan. I'd fled, abandoning everything I'd promised to myself. Everything after that had been a blur—where had I gone? Had I ridden a bus or taken the train? I wasn't sure. The only thing I knew was that once I'd come to my senses, I found myself standing stock-still in front of my apartment, soaking wet from the pouring rain.

I hadn't seen anything on my journey home, or, to be more precise, my brain simply hadn't recognized anything. Self-doubt swirled about obsessively in my mind. Hadn't I planned on getting a boyfriend for Haruka's sake? So why hadn't I gone along with Aizawa? Going along with his offer would have solved everything.

So why, then? Why hadn't I gone with him?

What in the world was I doing?

What in the world... do I want to do?

I was unable to reach an answer. In response to the numerous questions that tormented my mind, my awareness became clouded, and my field of vision dimmed. I looked up blankly in the darkness

and noticed the lights were turned on inside our room—Hiromichi had already returned.

I don't want to go in...

If Hiromichi started to joyfully gush about his first kiss, I feared what kind of expression I'd make. I wasn't confident in my ability to smile at him like I usually did.

"I'm scared..." I mumbled to myself.

Still, it was already 11:00PM, not to mention it was raining outside.

And I have no other place to call home...

I trudged up the rotting, steel-framed staircase like a zombie; that was when I realized that I was barefoot. I must have left my broken sandals somewhere and forgotten about them in my daze.

How did I not notice something so obvious until just now? I wondered, laughing at myself derisively.

I climbed up to the second story and placed my hand on the apartment's doorknob. It was unlocked. Once I'd opened the door, I spotted Hiromichi's shoes in the entryway.

"I'm back," I announced as I entered the apartment.

I trudged down the hallway, besmirching the floor with my soggy footprints and splatters of water that dripped from my hair. Drip, drop, splash, splash.

I headed toward the living room and found Hiromichi sleeping with his back against the wall. Dinner lay completely untouched on top of the tea table. By all appearances, he'd fallen asleep before getting the chance to eat. He must have been exhausted between all the pent-up tension from the date and the lack of sleep from the night before.

He was in a deep sleep, slack-jawed, breathing peacefully, and seemingly enjoying a pleasant dream. I could see the traces of light pink lipstick on the corner of his mouth—the same kind I used.

"Aha..."

At that moment, a rush of refreshing air flowed through my nostrils and filled my head with clarity, as if I'd just splashed my face with cold water. The sensation caused my mind to go blank, and all of the doubts that had harrowed me disappeared. Only a single impulse remained, and it drove me forward.

I crossed the doorframe between the hallway and living room, unconcerned with getting the tatami mat wet. I approached Hiromichi, licked my lips, and pressed them against his.

"Mmm..." I moaned.

While Hiromichi twitched in his sleep, I placed my hand on his cheek, caressed my wet lips against his dry ones, and replaced Haruka's lingering sensation with my own. Once I eventually pulled

away, I found that the pink smudge of her lipstick had disappeared.

“Mmmm!”

An intense mixture of pleasure and pain shot through my body, and I trembled in response.

Oh, I see...

It was at that moment that I finally understood. For the first time in my life, I knew what my mother must have experienced when she destroyed our family. It felt as though the world had been split into two—one side existed just for him, and the other for everyone else. Everything I’d built up in my life—trust, friendship, love, values, and the relationships I’d formed—deteriorated into utter insignificance when I compared them to the one person before me.

Could this overpowering obsession be... love? I wondered.

I’d just experienced that emotion for the first time in my life. I’d fallen in love with my stepbrother, not to mention my sister’s boyfriend. Could there have been a comedy more ridiculously contrived than this one? Anyone who willingly stepped onto this stage, compelled by a fleeting whim, must have been insane. I truly believed that.

But now I know.

When I’d seen Hiromichi and Haruka kiss from my spot on the pedestrian bridge, I hadn’t been able to accept reality. Once I had accepted it, an intense urge to destroy everything had overcome me. I was no longer able to deceive myself, nor was there any turning back.

Even if I gave up the larger piece of cake or first place, I wouldn’t give up this love.

X X X

I was kissing Haruka. At first, I thought I must be asleep and that the remnants of the best day of my life must have conjured up a wonderful dream. But all too soon I noticed that something was wrong—I’d never felt anything remotely like this. I mean, the passion in this kiss could melt my very lips. Was it even possible for me to dream of something I’d never experienced?

Wait, this is real, isn’t it?!

“What the hell?!”

I pushed Haruka off of me in a panic.

No, this isn’t Haruka.

I hadn’t been able to tell for a split second, but the girl in front of me was Shigure. Her hair and clothes were sopping wet.

“Good morning, Big Bro,” she greeted me.

“Sh-Shigure?! What the hell were you doing just now?!”

“I should have guessed you’d wake up the second time. Oh well, it’s not like it makes any difference to me.”

Did she just say “the second time”?! No, the number doesn’t matter!

“Y-You just k-kissed me, didn’t you?!” I stammered. “Wh-Why?!”

“There’s only one reason to ever kiss someone—because you like them. Didn’t I say so before? ‘Kiss the girl you like, not me.’ Well, I’m kissing the boy I like.”

“Wh-What?! You like me?! That can’t be—”

“Oh, shut up already,” she commanded. Then, a second kiss—no, a third—forcibly did the job for me.

“Sh-Shigure, if this is one of your sick jokes again...” I trailed off.

“I like you.”

“I’m trying to tell you—”

“I like you so much.”

“C’mon, cut that—”

“I like you more than you’ll ever know. “

Each time she professed her feelings, she kissed me. Shigure’s emotions—her passion, her love—permeated from her burning lips and washed over my entire body. It caused my body to freeze up, as if it were some sort of deadly substance. A deep affection welled up in Shigure’s eyes, which threatened to spill out in the form of tears at any moment. Those eyes perceived, ensnared, and completely overwhelmed me. She was looking at me and me alone.



“I like you so much,” she whispered. “You’re my incredibly kind older brother. I don’t mind if you keep dating Haruka. I don’t even care if you two get married and have a family. I don’t need any of those things—after all, I don’t want to make Haruka sad, and I know how worthless the façade of “family” is. It’s not like those bonds are real, no matter what people say. All I want is for you to keep me in the deepest reaches of your heart from here on out. That’ll be enough for me. So... do you want to have a fling with me?”

I’d heard similar words at some point in the past. Yet even so...

“This time, I’m not joking,” she assured me.

Yeah... I know.

Shigure would never look at me like that—would never kiss me like that—as a joke. Even a dunce like me, who thought women were from Venus, could tell how serious she was. Shigure ever so gently placed her hand on my cheek and pressed her lips to mine once again. I’d lost track of how many times we’d done this by now, but unlike her indulgent kisses from earlier, this one was gentle.

I could have resisted this time and shoved her away. And yet, I couldn’t bring myself to do so. Was I paralyzed by the spontaneity of the event? Had the sheer enormity of Shigure’s emotions conquered me? I didn’t know. I was only able to say one thing for certain: the deadly poison of love—detestable in its sweetness—had snaked its way into my veins.

That was why I kissed Shigure in return. A sweet, gentle, and passionate feeling eroded all thought. I’d already forgotten the sensation of Haruka’s kiss, which I’d expected and even vowed to remember forever.

On the same day as my first kiss with my most beloved Haruka, I also kissed my girlfriend’s little sister.

Afterword

Pure romantic comedies were in a slump for a while, but they're all the rage again! And so I had no choice but to write one that I'd been keeping on the backburner. As you know, it's all about a girlfriend and her little sister. What? That doesn't sound like a "pure romance" to you? Well, you couldn't be more wrong! This love is so pure, it transcends our standard views of morality. Who could possibly label that as anything else?

Actually, my supervisor would strongly object to me saying that. Hi, I'm Riku Misora: the author of *Sister Kiss*, which I'm reluctantly—very reluctantly—now calling an "impure romantic comedy."

Still, doesn't that sound nice? Even if you had a loving girlfriend, who would turn down another girl—who loves you just as much—flirting with you? And if those two girls happened to be best friends, what on earth could be better?

(Yes, I realize how horrible that sounds.)

There are plenty of emotions that can only be expressed in this type of romantic comedy—for instance, the conflicts resulting from the setup or the two heroines battling it out upon learning the truth.

In particular, I put a lot of effort into writing Hiromichi's struggles to keep everything a secret. With his girlfriend absent, he finds himself with another girl who looks like and adores him just as much as she does. As they exchange sweet words and engage in some rather extreme physical intimacy, his reason and morality gradually deteriorate. Despite realizing the error of his ways, he fails to resist her beauty and the breadth of her love and slowly sinks into degeneracy. I wanted to depict that process like syrup oozing from a bottle.

In any case, I've finished setting up the relationships in volume one. As soon as he failed to reject Shigure, Hiromichi plunged himself right into the darkest timeline! Hahaha!

That being said, the second volume can only exist with the support of you readers. That's why I'm grateful to everyone who bought this book and helped it get to this point. I can continue writing thanks to those who are willing to buy and read any novel, regardless of the genre, and to those "cultured individuals" who are willing to pick up an unorthodox work like *Sister Kiss*. If you've completed this book and now long for a life of depravity with Shigure, please keep an eye out for the next volume!

Now, onto the acknowledgements:

Sabamizore-Sensei, you couldn't have graced this work with a more fitting cover illustration. Thank you! The way you draw the lips of your female characters is particularly wonderful.

I'm also grateful to the GA editorial department, which was responsible for publishing this project, and to my supervisor. Though our clashing definitions of "pure romance" may tear us apart, I'm nevertheless glad we're working together!

Finally, I'd like to give my biggest thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in the afterword of the second volume.

-Riku Misora

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ISBN: 978-84-19056-04-7

KANOJO NO IMOUTO TO KISS WO SHITA Vol. 1

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by SB Creative Corp.

This English edition is published by arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo in care of Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo

Translation Work: Joshua Shupp

Editing Work: Maral RahmanPour

QA Team: Adam Mousir & Ethan Demedeiros.

Digital Lettering Work: Red Bucket.

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